

STEEL CITY HEROES BOOK 2

CORROSION

The book cover features a man and a woman as the central figures. The man, on the left, has a dark jacket and his face and arm are covered in glowing orange and red flames. The woman, on the right, has long dark hair and is wearing a dark jacket; her hands are glowing with blue and purple energy, surrounded by a circular telekinetic field. The background is a dark blue cityscape at night, with a large, glowing blue circular pattern resembling a target or a stylized sun in the center. The overall color palette is dominated by blue, orange, and purple.

C M RAYMOND
L E BARBANT

CORROSION

By LE Barbant and CM Raymond

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EPILOGUE

Chris and Lee Online

DEDICATION



The Crucible is dedicated to the city of Pittsburgh, where heroes are
born.

PROLOGUE



The creature pulled through the water with webbed hands, driving its body like a knife. The glow of the city's skyline reached down through the murky Monongahela River, offering plenty of light for eyes adapted to darkness. With a final surge, it broke through the surface and felt the shock of a cold, fierce wind strike its face.

Pittsburgh's winters were unforgiving, but the creature had become accustomed to the seasonal punishment through years of dwelling in the Steel City. Adapt or die, the fundamental law of nature was as true here as anywhere.

It glided toward the river's edge. Stepping up onto the rocks, its bare feet, with their razor-sharp claws, crunched the thin layer of ice that had managed to overtake the bank. A narrow path wound up the rise, leading toward the highway, still abuzz with the remnants of evening traffic. It crouched low behind a barricade, not wanting to be seen. The wind grabbed at a yellow raincoat, which veiled the hideous figure, and whipped the tattered ends up like an old kite. What the cloak lacked in form it more than made up for in function.

The creature preferred to be veiled from human eyes when it moved on land.

A few moments in wait, and the traffic thinned. Breaking into a dead sprint, it ran across the highway, leaping barriers that blocked its path. Webbed feet slapping on slick asphalt, it ran until it found a dark alleyway, which provided cover almost as thick as the river's dirty depths.

A few turns down the desolate passageway landed it at the edge of a crowded open square. It knelt behind a giant concrete planter. A leafless tree adorned in Christmas lights reached up toward the star-filled heavens. The tiny bulbs cast their glow down on the families gathered at the skating rink in PPG Place.

Instinct had drawn the creature here. Or maybe it was fate.

The joyful squeals of children were suddenly replaced by the sound of a thousand chandeliers shattering through the cold, winter air. The creature turned its gaze toward the building, which towered over them all. As if in slow motion, a million shards of glass spread out over the square, each of them catching the city's light and shining like

shooting stars.

What came next was worse.

Two titans shot out from the gaping hole in the side of the building. From its vantage point, the creature could clearly see their descent. One of them glowed like a metal poker pulled from a furnace. The other, dark and powerful, held the glowing beast by the throat.

The monsters exchanged blows as they plummeted toward the earth. Their assaults ended as their bodies found *terra firma*, creating a crater in the concrete at the foot of the tower.

Silence turned to screams, and families dashed in every direction.

The monsters didn't move for a breath, but the stillness didn't last. Within seconds, they were on their feet, sustained by power and rage. A melee between the gods.

As they fought, a gust of wind rose up out of nowhere. Lightning split the air, as if it were a late summer night. And the heavens tore open, releasing a shower of hailstones.

There was nothing natural about this event.

The creature watched the monsters of Pittsburgh battle against one another, and the corners of its thin mouth turned up into something like a smile. Because there, among the warring angels—or demons—stood a man.

Tall and wiry, he moved toward the fight like a fool with a death wish. But it wasn't his death he sought. He dropped to his knees, a white lab coat his only armor. He reached into a leather bag to draw forth his weapon.

The creature scrambled closer, toward the awkward dance of magic and monsters, drawn by the human in the midst. This was what it had come to see.

With fumbling hands, the man pulled out a hypodermic needle big enough for a horse.

He dove at the icy monster and drove the needle deep into its neck.

The thing reared up, screaming. It released the glowing red beast and took a step, wobbled, and dropped. Ice melted from it as if the thing had been dropped in a cauldron of boiling water, leaving nothing but a beautiful woman.

The creature's heart stopped.

This was the answer.

The fight didn't end there. The ice queen regained her throne, shaking the city with her blood curdling scream.

Horror filled the faces of her enemies.

But the creature's smile broadened as it watched.

"There is hope after all," it hissed.

PART ONE



*My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun; Coral is far more red than her
lips' red; If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun; If hairs be wires,
black wires grow on her head.*

*I have seen roses damask'd, red and white, But no such roses see I in
her cheeks;*

*And in some perfumes is there more delight Than in the breath that
from my mistress reeks.*

*I love to hear her speak, yet well I know That music hath a far more
pleasing sound; I grant I never saw a goddess go;*

*My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground: And yet, by
heaven, I think my love as rare As any she belied with false compare.*

"Sonnet 130," William Shakespeare

CHAPTER ONE



Why the hell am I doing this?

Elijah's heart hammered in his chest, and he swore that his hidden adversary could hear it across the still factory floor. His hands shook as he willed his feet to advance against their better judgment. Sweat dripped down his brow.

Terror gripped him. But still, he couldn't deny the thrill.

Despite the anxiety and adrenaline coursing through his body, he kept his focus on the task at hand. Six months ago, Elijah had been nothing more than a historian—a lowly adjunct professor eking out a career with whatever half-assed classes he could cobble together. The thought of sneaking through an abandoned factory in the dead of night would have filled him with dread.

But the professor's old life had been laid to rest. Something greater had emerged.

And he wasn't alone. *Her* presence lingered somewhere close by. He could feel it.

He held his breath and listened. The faint murmur of a whisper echoed out of the darkness, calling to him, leading him deeper and deeper in. Then, a faint scratching sound, like metal on concrete rang out. The whispers morphed into a deep throated roar, rising in speed and volume. Elijah rolled up his sleeves and prepared for what came next.

A steel beam soared out of the shadows. Elijah dove, leaving behind skin on the rough floor but dodging the missile. It clattered into the wall of rusted out machinery behind him. Before its echoes ended, she was on him.

He got to his feet as a fist knocked him back on his ass. She wasn't dicking around.

Elijah rolled out of the way as she continued her attack, a flurry of fists and kicks and elbows. He dodged some, blocked others, but more than enough found their mark. They bruised his soft body. She had the upper hand. Superior strength and training had him outmatched in every way.

Every way but one.

A knee to the stomach knocked the wind out of him—and

something else filled its place. A fire deep inside him sprung to life. An ancient furnace fueled by a love of place and a hatred of those who would threaten it. It burned in his gut—spread to his chest and arms. She wound up, a wild haymaker meant to finish him off.

He caught the fist in midair—his hand now twice the size it was only a moment ago.

Her eyes opened wide like two glowing orbs, floating in the darkness. She showed fear, surprise, or something else, he wasn't sure. Elijah smiled and opened his mouth to say something, but then the fire took over. A scream erupted from his throat and molten steel forced its way through his skin, pushing its way out of the scar that covered his chest. His eyes felt like they were melting. His arms rippled as the dark metal covered them.

She grunted as the heat hit her. She tried to pull away, but his hand was a fiery vice—his grip unyielding as the pain stole any control he had. Elijah couldn't move. He could only scream and let the fire wash him away.

But it didn't, at least not altogether. Steel covered his chest but stopped there. It dripped from his elbows, down past his wrists. He could feel it burning around his eyes like a dark, angry mask, but it left the rest of his face and head intact.

But his legs remained those of Elijah Branton—weak and vulnerable. A fact that she knew and immediately exploited.

When back pulling on his hand didn't work, she kicked out at his thigh. It was an aggressive move—one he didn't see coming. His leg buckled, and he dropped to a knee. The careful attack forced his hand to open just enough to allow her escape.

She jumped back, mouth moving once again. The words washed over him. He couldn't understand them, but he knew what they meant. They meant power, they meant fury, they meant pain.

“Que comprendre à ma parole?”

Il fait qu'elle fuie et vole!”

Before he could retreat, the attack came. A force like frozen wind erupted from her, but he gained control of his body just in time. He leaned forward and raised his arms in a rough X. His shoes slid along the concrete floor as the wind pushed him back. But he kept his feet. His metal arms, now hardened, took the brunt of the force. As the attack ended, he lowered his shield and stood at full height.

He was much more than a historian, much more than a man. He was a creature caught between two worlds, with enough power to break bones and bend steel.

She stared at him, reached up and pulled down her mask. Behind it, a warm smile beamed.

Her smile.

Willa's smile.

"I think that's enough for today," she said. "Why don't we take a break before you hurt yourself. Or worse...me."

CHAPTER TWO



Elijah smiled back, panting from the workout. She was winded too, despite the leg up she had on him in terms of fitness. He glanced down at his arms and chest while trying to catch his breath.

Six months ago, when he first came to this factory, something happened to him, something that his rational mind still failed to comprehend. His body had come into contact with a force beyond nature. Gabrijel—a protector spirit that had spent a century trapped in hardened steel. Somehow, Elijah had served as Gabrijel’s liberator and host. Their minds and bodies melded, and Elijah turned into a creature of fire and steel—a giant dripping with molten metal and endowed with awe-inspiring power.

But once Gabrijel fulfilled his mission, his spirit departed, leaving Elijah behind to grapple with this new-found power.

A loud clapping startled him as Chem stepped out from the shadows. His wide grin sat under focused eyes.

“Grade-A man. You managed to hold off the transformation for,” he pulled the pencil from behind his ear and scratched a note in his beat-up journal, “nearly twice the time. We keep this going, you’ll never have to worry about going Full-Foundry ever again.”

Full-Foundry.

Translation: a giant covered in steel from head to toe. The internet gave him a number of names after the “doctored” video of his attack on Mount Washington appeared. The Foundry seemed to have stuck as the rumors of the monster terrorizing Pittsburgh spiraled into tabloid nonsense.

Elijah hadn’t fully transformed since February. Since the fight at PPG Place, the shimmering tower that dominated the Pittsburgh skyline. Not since the night Brooke Alarawn died.

While his passenger had departed, Elijah remained, clueless as to how to proceed. Gabrijel had brought power, but he also granted control. Now, with the power in Elijah’s hands, the transformation proved more difficult. Gabrijel left behind no manual. There was no clear on/off switch.

He could only bring forth the steel in the heat of battle. The first couple of times they sparred, Willa had to beat the hell out of him

before he could get anything going, and even then, only a fraction of his former power emerged. Chem had a field day with the sexual innuendos, but the lack of progress unnerved Elijah. Chem kept rigorous notes of everything that Elijah did, working to bring some scientific clarity to whatever the hell he had become.

And it was that scientific clarity that would help Chem heal Elijah once and for all, something the scientist promised would happen soon, as long as they kept up these tests.

Chem's commitment to the project often outpaced Elijah's own. Sure, he wanted to be free of these powers, but to hear Chem talk about it, there was no time to waste. So they kept practicing. He learned how to call the power forth when he needed it, not before and not too late. Still, he lacked the enormity he once had. The steel only covered his arms, chest, and face. Instead of dripping with metal, the heat cooled almost as soon as it came, letting the steel harden to his skin.

More than enough to turn the bookish professor into a capable force, but there were miles still to go before he could control it entirely.

"I didn't kick you too hard, did I?" Willa placed her hand on his shoulder. Gone was the warrior from a moment ago. Once again, she exuded the warmth and kindness of a saint—albeit one who knew how to pack a ferocious punch.

She too had been busy. Ever since her grandfather died saving them from the monster that had been Brooke Alarawn, Willa had devoted herself to her craft. She spent hours poring over books of poetry—the fertile ground from which her spells grew. In addition to that, she also had set up a makeshift gym in her basement. The results of her training reared its head every time she cracked Elijah's jaw.

"*Please*. Don't you know I'm made of steel?" Elijah scoffed playfully. "It's going to take more than your chicken legs to take me down."

"Fine. Next time maybe I'll aim my foot just lower than your stomach. Not *all* of you is made of steel."

The look in her eye said she meant it, and Elijah went a little weak at the knee. His hands might be able to break through brick, but his half-turned form left plenty of vulnerabilities, a problem he had yet figured out how to fix.

"Noted," Chem said. "Don't insult the poet's legs. Luckily, once I've figured out a cure, she won't have to kick you at all. Unless you're into that kind of thing." As he talked he checked Elijah over. Heart rate, temperature, reflexes. The classic post-training workup. They must have gone through this routine a hundred times, more so now that university classes were over, and they had the free time of summer.

“Looks like you singed your shirt sleeves again.”

Elijah looked down. Chem was right. The steel covered his hands and came up just past his elbow. His rolled sleeves were darkened and crispy. The cotton over his chest had burned clean through; the strange symbol still glowed an angry orange.

“At least he kept his pants on this time,” Willa said. “This is far more enjoyable without you running around butt-naked afterward.”

“Agreed,” Chem said.

“Screw both of you,” Elijah laughed. “Why don’t you make me some sort of flame-resistant shirt? That way I don’t need to buy a new pack of Hanes each week.”

“If there’s a stylish fabric that can withstand molten steel, I don’t know it. Those welder’s mitts Willa uses are about as good as we’re gonna get, and I don’t think they come in tweed.”

“They barely work anyway,” Willa said, shaking the gloves off. “If it wasn’t for my spell work, you would have torched my skin. Even with my magic, it hurts like a mother.”

“Sorry,” Elijah said, suddenly worried he had taken his attack too far. “You okay?”

“I’m fine. I’d be a fool if I thought I could go toe-to-toe with fire and not get burned. But it’s nothing a stiff drink won’t fix.”

Elijah nodded, then fell to his knees in pain. Chem and Willa stepped back. They knew what came next.

When Elijah turned, molten steel pushed its way through his pores and hardened, covering him in an impenetrable armor. But the transformation went both ways. As he cowered on the ground, the steel melted. It dripped off his skin and gathered on the floor in steaming pools. First his face, then his arms, and lastly, his chest.

Agony came quickly, but it didn’t last. He looked up at them and did his best to share a resolute smile as the cool factory air touched his raw skin.

“So,” he said, “about that stiff drink?”

CHAPTER THREE



Raucous energy poured out of Voodoo Brewery—rare for a Tuesday night. An old firehall turned bar, the building had double garage-style doors that opened up to outdoor seating. Chem went to buy a round while Elijah and Willa slid into a table built from recycled pallet wood—the only free spot in the crowded watering hole. Elijah liked it there. The place had a cool vibe while lacking the sense of pretense carried by so many hipster bars in Pittsburgh. Dark paint covered the wall behind the bar, and bright chalk outlined Voodoo’s extensive craft beer selection in blues, yellows, and greens.

A Van Morrison song came over the sound system, and the crowd erupted into a drunken chorus. It was some kind of party. A huge, brute of a man with shaggy blond hair and an easy, welcoming smile stood in the center of the crowd, graciously accepting the drinks bought in his honor. Elijah assumed it was a birthday, maybe a homecoming. The man was local—it wasn’t hard to tell who fit in around here. Elijah, on the other hand, had a wardrobe and the hints of a New England accent that screamed out-of-towner.

Definitely homecoming, he thought, as he looked at the man. Elijah figured him for a soldier by the size of his arms, and the confidence in which he carried himself. Someone who looked like he could laugh down gunfire and eat chaos for breakfast. A different breed from the historian whose defining adjectives were thin, soft, and weak.

At least that’s how Elijah had always seen himself. Now, he wasn’t so sure. A thousand times since February, he asked himself why this power had come to *him* of all people. He had never been mistaken for a brave man. Hell, he had rarely been confused of being an honorable one. And yet, Gabrijel had merged spirits with him. But why?

A thousand and one times Elijah had asked, and still no answer. “Everything okay?”

Willa’s voice broke his reverie. Her smile was a reminder that at least one person believed in him.

“Just peachy,” he said. “Thinking about a book I want to add to the syllabus next year.”

“I sure hope every time you look like that you’re not adding a book to your syllabus. Students are going to hate you.”

"If history is a good predictor of the future, they'll hate me no matter what. What about you? What was your secret? You had a pretty good score on Rate My Professor last I checked." Willa's smile dimmed a little at the question—a look Elijah knew well. Ever since she quit her job at the University, she seemed to be missing something.

"Just speak the truth," she said. "Being likeable isn't the job."

Elijah nodded. "I can nail the not be likeable part. As far as speaking the truth... that's going to be a bit tougher. My whole discipline is grounded on the idea that history is made by men and women. Not by..." He hesitated, unsure how to continue.

"Freaks like us?" Willa filled in.

"Yeah."

"We're still human, last I checked," she said.

"Barely," Chem added as he dropped the drinks on the table and pulled up a stool. "No human could survive the trauma that Captain Kilimanjaro here puts his body through on a daily basis. Flesh and fire don't usually mix well. Whatever is swimming around in his blood, it's not human."

Willa took a sip. "It's not our bodies that make us human, Chem. Maybe Elijah's body doesn't hold the answers you're looking for."

Chem rolled his eyes. "Not *this* horseshit again. I swear, for someone so smart your head is sure full of nonsense. There is a *scientific* explanation for what happened to Elijah. To what's still happening to him. Speculation about the soul or the spirit or whatever you want to call it is a waste of time. We just need more data. That's all. We'll get there. And then we can reverse course."

"What about Willa?" Elijah asked Chem. "I consider myself as rational as the next guy, but her poem powers make me feel like I'm stuck on the wrong side of the wardrobe. What's the science there?"

Chem considered this for a second. "Willa is..."

She raised her eyebrow, warning him to watch his words.

"Let's just say that Willa makes as much sense to me as decaf coffee. Or vegan bacon. Or...or freaking poetry!" Chem smiled, obviously pleased with his burn. "That shit's all nonsense. But you, man, you're not a lost cause. We'll figure it out. Research just takes time."

Elijah nodded then took another sip. Chem was a broken record when it came to his powers. It was a song Elijah had begun to tune out.

"As weird as it sounds, I'm far less interested in my backstory and more concerned with my future," Elijah said. "Where the hell is all of this leading?"

Willa stared at him, questioning, but she kept her thoughts to

herself.

“Hopefully,” Chem said, “it ends with you being cured. Me winning a Nobel Prize. And Willa...owning less than a dozen cats. Then we can get on with our lives.”

Elijah thought about it as he finished his beer. Time for another.

“Yeah, you’re probably right. I’d still like to write that book about the Alarawns. That’ll be easier without dripping steel all over my laptop.”

“Trust me,” Chem said. “Once I find a cure for you, you can go back to burying your head in a book every night rather than letting the Big Dickinson over here kick your ass. That’s what you should be focused on—getting back to your old life.”

He downed his drink then left for the bar. Elijah watched Chem as he wove through the crowd. There was truth in what he said. The scientist knew Elijah well, knew his weaknesses. Knew his demons. He was probably right.

“You did well tonight,” Willa said, breaking the awkward silence.

“What?”

“Listen.” She leaned closer. “I know the fighting is just a means to an end, but I’m not exactly going easy on you out there. You kept your head, you reacted, planned for what was happening next. You’re getting better, and I’m not just talking about controlling your powers.”

Elijah felt his face grow warm. Chem might know Elijah’s demons, but whenever Willa spoke, it was like she knew a part of him he didn’t yet know. A better version of himself.

“High praise,” he said. “You’re not half bad yourself. Whatever MMA shit you’ve been studying really works. I think *he* would have been proud of you. How capable you are of handling yourself.”

“Yeah. Or maybe he would have hated it.” Her smile dimmed again.

Elijah knew that her grandfather was a sore subject for her, and he kicked himself for bringing it up.

Before he could figure out a way to apologize, she got to her feet, her glass half empty. “I’m pretty tired. Gonna call it a night. Make sure you put some ice on that bruise.” She pointed at the sore spot on his cheek, which he imagined was starting to bloom purple.

“Thanks for not pulling your punches,” he said.

She smiled. “And I don’t know how much this is worth, considering I’m little more than an unemployed poet now, but I like Professor Elijah Branton just fine. When he’s not being a misogynistic ass, that is. If that’s who you want to be, then maybe that’s enough. Maybe you don’t need anything more.”

Elijah nodded.

“Or,” she said, “maybe you were called here for a bigger reason

than *The Alarawn Story: An Extensive History of Pittsburgh Steel*, as riveting as I'm sure that will be."

Elijah laughed and tried to come up with a witty response, but she was already gone. He watched her walk past the party and out the door. Willa spoke to him like he was a better man. Her words made him want to live into them, believe that the universe had a bigger plan for him than giving half-assed lectures and grading quarter-assed papers.

He found himself inadvertently staring at the soldier again. Their eyes met, and the man raised a glass toward Elijah. His eyes squinted as he smiled. Elijah nodded in reply, then looked down at his hands wrought with sores.

Willa was wrong. Men like that guy at the bar, they made history, not guys like Elijah. He got up to find Chem and order another round of drinks.

CHAPTER FOUR



Tim Ford leaned against the bar with a shit-eating grin on his face and concrete churning in his stomach. Nearly every soul he loved in this world filled Voodoo, and all of them came out just for him. He was a hero, after all. That's what every last one of them said. And he deserved this hero's welcome. But even if the plastic smile fooled the horde, it couldn't cover the tension in Tim's gut.

He was no hero.

"Hey, everybody. Listen up" Bobby yelled over the jukebox. The crowd responded with a roar. The party was set to start at eight. By seven-thirty, everybody in the joint was already three sheets to the wind and working on the fourth.

Including Bobby.

"Shut the *fuck* up already!"

The crowd fell quiet, and they all turned toward their host. Bobby looked out over them with his vibrant green eyes. They were sharp, even after several pints of Voodoo's finest IPA. The drunken revelers shifted so they could see him from where he sat. Bobby, with a shock of dark hair hanging over his boyish face, looked far too young to have gone into combat. He definitely wasn't old enough to be confined to a wheelchair—his terrible sacrifice to a miserable mission. His own homecoming party had come all too soon. But that didn't dampen his spirit, or the joy he showed now that his best friend had come home too.

"All right, all right," Bobby continued with a hint of a slur. "Simmer down just for one motherfucking second."

The crowd laughed. "I think you invited the wrong jagoffs to this party," someone shouted from the back.

Against all possibility, Bobby's grin grew larger. "Beggars can't be choosers, Brett. Anyway, me and Ford here," he pointed up at Tim Ford, a monster of a man with shaggy dirty-blond hair and the build of a juiced-up ballplayer, "we've known most you since elementary school. Hell, Vinny over there, he used to brag about getting to second base with my sister."

"It was third," Vinny shouted. "I just didn't have the heart to tell you." A scruffy looking guy just off work and still in his Dickies raised

his pint glass.

"Yeah, I always hated you, Vinny." Bobby took a second to give his friend from the old neighborhood the finger. "Anyway, tonight's not about me, and it sure as hell ain't for Vinny. We're here because the best damn friend any of us could have has finally come home to the Burgh. And it's about fucking time. So, raise a glass and welcome home Tim Ford. My friend, my fellow Marine, my hero."

"And your lover," a woman's voice shouted from the back of the crowd.

"Is that you, mom?" Bobby yelled in her direction, bringing the room back to laughter.

Glasses were raised in a toast to their friend.

Tim Ford raised his own glass back to them, almost to the level of his chin. His smile never wavered.

After the drinks were downed, the crowd started chanting, "Speech, speech, speech."

Tim worked up a laugh and swiped his hand through his hair. His stomach flipped again, but he knew he had to put on his best for them. Especially for his friend in the chair. "Thanks, Bobby. And thanks to everybody who came out. I ain't much for speeches, and you guys know that. But after years of travelling the world, there's no place I'd rather be than in Pittsburgh. Especially since I hear Vinny's mom is single again." Laughs and shouts welled up, drowning out Vinny's comeback. Ford raised his glass again. "Seriously though, nothing got me through the fight more than the thought of yinz guys back here, back home. Your thoughts and prayers meant the world to me. Each and every one of them kept me going. I felt them."

Ford patted his chest over his heart and then reached down and squeezed Bobby's shoulder. A wave of emotion swept over him, and he wanted to drop his drink and run. "Now, enough with this sentimental bullshit. Let's get hammered."

Another shout went up, just as the bartender cranked the music. Tim leaned down to Bobby, beaming up at him like some star struck fanboy. "Thanks, Bobby. Really."

"Nah, man. Thank *you*."

Without another word, Tim turned for the bar, hoping to get a pint and catch his breath. He nodded to the bartender, but before he could get his drink, Mike Solinski straddled up at his side. "Saw some shit over there, didn't ya?" Mike was never one to mince words.

Ford shrugged. "Sure, I saw some shit. All part of the job."

Mike leaned in. "Hell of a thing, Ford. I mean, going over there to do your tour with the Corps, I get that. I'm a pretty patriotic motherfucker myself. And if it wasn't for this bad shoulder," Mike rotated his arm with a wince, "I'm sure I probably would've enlisted.

But why the hell did you go back? That's what I can't figure. What was the name of that outfit? Blackbone? Blackballs?"

"Blackbow." Most folks back home didn't know much about the mercenary unit—the news never reported on them—but people sure knew that name in Iraq, Venezuela, and Ukraine.

"They sound badass," Mike said.

Badass didn't begin to cover it, but Ford's time with Blackbow was the last thing he wanted to talk about with someone like Mike.

"Well, I don't have your brains or your good looks, Mike. A guy's gotta make a livin' somehow." Ford grinned and clinked his glass against his friend's.

Mike wrapped his arm around Ford and pulled him into a half-man hug. "Well, I know it isn't much, but thanks for serving man. And, you know, thanks for..." Mike glanced over at Bobby, who was impressing some young ladies by doing wheelies in his chair. A circle had spread out around him.

"Nothing he wouldn't have done for me twice over. We all know that."

"Hell yeah," Mike said, his eyes still on Bobby's acrobatics.

Tim wanted nothing more than for Mike to stop talking. He nodded off across the room. "Hey, that's Becca Shay over there, right?"

Mike exhaled. "Sure is. She's as hot as ever. Isn't she?"

Ford nodded. "Sweet girl, too. Well, she's been making eyes at you ever since we've been talking."

"No shit?" Mike shot back.

"I shit you not. You should go talk to her."

Mike smoothed his hair and checked it in the mirror on the back of the bar. "I'm going in, soldier."

"Oorah!" Ford shouted as he pushed Mike off into the crowd. "And watch that bad shoulder."

The night progressed just like that. One well-wisher after another. One free drink after another. And Ford smiled through his teeth for all of it. His crew was his life; he loved them, and he knew what they expected of him. But being in the spotlight made his skin crawl, and the one thing he wanted more than anything at that moment was to get the hell out of Dodge.

Things looked up when Liz took the seat next to him at the bar. Half-Korean and all hell-raiser, Liz had a face that could launch a thousand ships and a mouth that could sink them all. "What's up, hero?" she asked.

Ford laughed. "Not you too? It's like everyone here forgot my name or something."

Liz smiled. "Fine, dickhead, I'll go back to calling you little Timmy

Shitstain." She gave a wink just to make sure he knew she was joking. "Seriously though, glad to have you home Ford."

Tim looked around the room at all of his friends having a hell of a time, like they were all back in their early twenties—as if someone pushed pause on the city of Pittsburgh nearly a decade ago. He forced a grin, this one a bit more authentic than the others. "Yeah. It's good to be home. I've needed this. You know, get things back to normal."

"The new normal is never the same as the old," she said, taking Ford's beer out of his hand. Tilting the glass, she drew a long, slow, seductive drink. Ford's heart drummed in double-time. He'd been pinned down by enemy fire, cleared desert holes of hostiles, and even got shot down in a CH-53E. But none of that affected him like her presence. She handed the glass back to him. "But enough about you, let's talk about me."

"Your favorite subject," Ford said. Liz gave him a slap on the shoulder. "What?" He laughed. "It's true."

A silent moment fell between them. They sat, like two wax figures, as the party roared around them. Finally, he asked, "Still in your mom's place?"

"Sure am. Right where you left me, a couple of doors down from your old digs."

Memories rushed back of the neighborhood. Of he and Liz and Bobby getting into trouble. She was his first kiss, at the age of six, but he never managed to get a second out of her.

"Those were the days."

"If only we could go back, right?" she said.

Tim laughed and pulled his beer back from her. Liz couldn't know how right she was. A laundry list of mistakes clouded his half-drunk mind as he caught Bobby out of the corner of his eye.

"What was it like working for them, anyway?"

"Blackbow?"

"Yeah. I didn't expect you to go back into the fight after what happened."

Tim lied, "Not much different from the Marines. Mostly sitting around bullshitting with a bunch of other meatheads."

"So, it was like you and these other asshats in high school?"

Tim gave her his first genuine smile of the night. "Yeah. Pretty much like high school." Tim pulled a pack of Camels out of his jeans and motioned toward the door. "I'm gonna get some air. Want to join me?"

"Don't tempt me," Liz said. "Quit last year."

"Me too," Tim answered. "And the year before that. I'll catch you later."

Ford didn't wait for an answer. He gave his childhood crush a nod

and turned for the front of the bar. On his way out, his eye caught a guy sitting near the back of the room with a tight beard and button up shirt. He figured it was some sort of businessman or professor by the looks of it.

Ford raised a glass to the man. He wished he could be like him, just some common schmuck drinking a pint with his friends.

No worries about tomorrow.

No regrets about yesterday.

No screams gnawing at his mind.

CHAPTER FIVE



Tim barely heard the door slam behind him over the sound of the classic rock anthem his friends were belting out in the bar. Their chorus bled out through the two double garage doors that opened up into a cool little seating area inhabited by a few patrons. He took three paces in the opposite direction and leaned against the wall. He exhaled, long and hard, squeezing his eyes closed tight, as if some yoga-breathing bullshit might settle his nerves.

Ford opened the pack of Camels, holding them up to the light that cast down from the lonely street lamp overhead. His eyes dashed over the little white dots, taking stock of how many cigarettes were left. He cursed the price of smokes, and the fact that he was let go with less than a full severance. The price of how things all came to an end with Blackbow.

They didn't like deserters, after all.

Fishing into his pocket, he found the Zippo that he had carried with him to the four corners of the earth. Raised up on the silver metal plating was the emblem of a bow and a set of crossed arrows. The emblem matched the tattoo on Tim's massive bicep. A reminder of his life, and how things went sideways faster than you could say "shitstorm."

He flicked the lighter open with his thumb and snapped the striking wheel, bringing the flame to play in front of his eyes. Tim watched it dance for a second before lighting the cigarette and taking a long drag. The smoke felt good in his lungs, so he held it there as long as he could before discharging a thin blue stream into the still night air.

Anger, guilt, and sadness warred for control of Tim's mind, the drink and the smoke not enough to dull them all. His friends meant well. They were trying to honor him, and he knew it. Good intentions, road to hell, and all that bullshit. And he'd be a bastard if he didn't play the part of the grateful soldier finally home.

But it was a lie.

Jonesy, his mechanic friend who destroyed his body daily at work so he could afford his dad's cancer treatments was a hero. Melissa was a hero, pulling double shifts at Walmart to support her kid after her

asshole boyfriend left town with their car and a blonde from the East End.

The people in the bar were heroes.

Ford was a monster.

If only he could go back, make different decisions. He imagined himself getting a job hammering nails or working some factory line. If he could put in a good day's work only to come home to an honest woman, everything would be all rainbows and unicorns.

But the problem with time is that it always moved forward. It was the surest lesson war taught him. And the evidence of that just rolled out the door looking for him.

"There you are," Bobby said. "Things getting too hot for you in there?"

Tim took another drag. "A tactical retreat. I'll be back in a minute."

"Sure," Bobby shrugged, but he didn't take his eyes off Ford.

"Look, I know you hate this stuff, but everyone's really excited to see you."

Ford kept silent for a moment, but he couldn't keep the words in. "They wouldn't be if they knew the truth."

Bobby reached up and punched Ford in the shoulder. "Hey asshole, we've been through this already. They know the truth. You fought for your country. You fought for them. And you saved my life."

Ford threw his cigarette down. "I ruined your life."

"Look at me," Bobby said. "I'm still breathing. I chose to join the Marines, same as you. I followed orders that day, same as you. And the fact that you carried me out that day means that I get to keep living. It's time you started living again too. I know why you joined those Blackbow psychos, but whatever penance you think you owe you've already paid it out in full. You're home now. Be home."

Bobby turned and left Ford stewing in his thoughts. The sound of laughter broke him out of them. His head snapped to the left, looking for the threat, only to find three guys walking toward him. They were joking, laughing, carefree.

And they were pointing in the direction Bobby just went.

The scene was all too familiar. He'd seen it in a hundred cities in fifty different countries. Men everywhere were the same. They felt strong in numbers and were compelled to prove themselves by preying on the weak. As the guys came into sight, Ford realized that they were two Jagerbombs from throw-up drunk. Probably a regular occasion for them, and he knew they'd likely be looking to start shit.

Ford was happy to comply. The thought of them making fun of Bobby snapped something inside of him, and he needed to return the favor. Guns fired in his brain.

Tim pushed off of the wall and stood on the sidewalk in front of them.

As if on cue, the biggest of the three said, "Well, look at this douchebag."

"Hey," another said. "Asshole, the 90s called, they want their flannel back."

Ford smiled as his anger subsided. He took another breath and remembered that he was home now, the war a million miles away. These punks were idiots, certainly, but not worth breaking a sweat over. He thought about the party inside, the cold beer and the hot women. That sounded a hell of a lot better than dealing with three drunks out here.

"You boys have a good evening," Tim said and turned to walk away.

One of them shouted, "Hey, dipshit. We're talking to you."

Ford ignored it. Maybe he'd try an IPA. Apparently, they were all the rage these days.

"That's right, Run back to your friend. He probably sucks your dick nice from his chair."

The sound of automatic weapons echoed through Tim's mind. Explosions rang out. He was no longer in Pittsburgh, no longer in a quiet neighborhood. He was back in the shit, and these three were his enemy.

Ford knew how to deal with enemies.

He spun. Before the man could blink, Ford's right fist came up in a wicked uppercut, snapping his head back like a bobble head. As his body dropped toward the ground, Tim gave him another left into his rib cage just for good measure. In that moment, everything came into focus, and there was nothing in the world except for Tim Ford and bones in front of him waiting to be broken. His head cleared, and he could feel the sweet adrenaline course through his veins.

He felt alive.

The next guy, a tiny little dude, stared at Ford like a rabbit right before it bolts. But to his credit, he stood his ground, and even came at Ford swinging. Unfortunately, he was a rookie who projected his punch from a hundred miles away. Ford had no problem blocking it with his left. With a quick twist of his wrist, the guy was on his knees, crying out in pain. Ford landed three quick punches, dropping him to the ground.

Tim spun to face the last man standing.

What he didn't expect was to be staring down the barrel of a 90's model Lorcin .380 with a silver barrel. Tim hadn't seen one for years. It was a cheap street gun but would do its job, especially if it had all seven rounds in the clip.

He snapped his hands up as if he were terrified. "Whoa, whoa, whoa. Doesn't have to end like this."

The man glanced down at his friends who weren't moving. Ford's gaze focused on the gun. It shook, ever so slightly in the man's hand. His finger curled around the trigger instead of sitting up on the barrel. An amateur, through and through. Ford could judge a man's firearm experience with his eyes closed. But amateurs had a way of doing stupid things.

Really stupid things.

"Like hell it doesn't. Don't you know who I am?" the man asked.

Ford gave him a once over. The clothes looked expensive, as did the haircut. The square jaw and pale blue eyes did strike a chord, but Ford couldn't place them. Either way, it didn't matter. The man made fun of his friend. And he held a gun at Ford's face.

Which meant that Ford knew exactly who he was.

"You're a dead man."

"I'm the one with the piece, shithead."

Ford smiled. "Won't do you any good with the safety on."

The man looked down, and Ford lashed out, faster than the man could pull the trigger. A fist to the throat, then a rapid-fire combination to the man's stomach and sides. He was on the sidewalk before he knew what happened, with Ford on top of him. Part of Ford's mind registered the sound of a breaking jaw, but Ford could see nothing but the fear in the man's eyes.

But they weren't staring at Ford, they were looking at the gun in Ford's hands.

Ford looked down at the piece. He didn't even remember taking it from the goon, but now that he held it, it felt right in his hand. Ford leaned the barrel into the man's cheek. He could feel bone moving beneath as the man whimpered in pain. Then Ford pulled the trigger.

Nothing.

The man shuddered as if he had been shot, but once he realized his brains were still in his head, he opened his eyes and looked back at the pistol with the safety still on.

"Told you," Ford said as he rose to his feet.

He popped the magazine and racked the slide to eject the bullet from the chamber. Tossing the impotent weapon down on the concrete next the man, he slid the magazine into the back pocket of his jeans and palmed the single bullet. "This is my town, shit head. And if you want to keep living in it, it's time you learned some respect."

Looking down at the drunks, Tim's heart rate slowed. The world stood still.

He was at peace.

Then he opened the door and embraced the sound of cheers
welcoming their hero home.

CHAPTER SIX



Chem stared across the table at Elijah. The historian's face adopted that far off gaze that meant the beginning of some dour reflection. Not a good sign for Chem, who was currently enjoying a wonderful mood—for once. In his down-and-out life, things were actually starting to look up.

In his mind, that deserved a drink. He wanted to celebrate, not sit and watch his friend wallow.

Chem snapped his fingers twice.

"Hmmm?" Elijah said.

He laughed. "I don't know how they do things up in Boston, but in the Burgh, drooling toward a woman is no substitute for a good pickup line."

Elijah's eyes focused, and he seemed to realize that he was staring in the direction of a beautiful blonde hanging out with the partygoers. He quickly looked down at his beer.

Chem only laughed harder. "Why don't you just go talk to her, man. A sophisticated brother like yourself, I'm sure you'd make one hell of an impression."

Elijah picked up his pint glass and swirled the contents remaining at the bottom. He tilted it and poured the remnants of the IPA into his mouth. He shook his head. "That's the last thing I need right now. And besides, I try to make a move and there's a good chance one of those brick shithouses in flannel kicks my teeth in."

Chem drank from his own pint. "That's probably true. And for the record, I would *not* have your back in that fight."

"Noted," Elijah said with smile.

"But seriously, a woman would be good for you. Keep you grounded. When was the last time you even went on a date?"

As soon as Chem asked the question, he knew it was a mistake. Elijah's already low mood sank lower, as it did every time he thought about Brooke Alarawn.

"I'm sorry, man," Chem tried at an apology.

Elijah tried to blow it off. "No worries. It's just hard to think about new relationships when the last one ended so epically."

"Yeah..." Chem never really knew what to say when this topic

came up. Elijah never blamed Chem for what happened—the historian opted instead to carry most of the guilt on his own shoulders—but Chem assumed his friend had to harbor some resentment. Without Chem's work, without the Vida Serum, there would have been no Cold Steel.

"But you're right," Elijah said, brightening up. "Once you've figured out how to cure me, I can move on. You and I can both move on. And there'll be no chance of anything like that happening again. Right?"

Chem fought the urge to break eye contact. He smiled confidently and nodded his head. Then he lied. "Right."

It wasn't a full lie, but it was at least a few shades darker than a little white lie. Chem *was* working on a way to cure Elijah. But it just so happened that his work on the cure coincided with his old work. Chem didn't think Elijah needed to know about that.

After Brooke stole his serum and used it to murder a dozen people, Chem had considered throwing the Vida Serum away...for all of two seconds. Elijah and Willa assumed he would—it only made sense to their minds. But for Chem, the Vida Serum was so much more than a pet project. It was his life. And with every new ounce of control the historian exerted over his powers, Chem's hope rose. He still didn't understand the power in Elijah's blood, but every test brought him closer to figuring out how to use it. Which meant the end was near. He could see the finish line, and only a few hurdles stood between him and total redemption.

Nothing was going to get in his way this time.

"What about you, man?" Elijah asked. "You got a woman that keeps you grounded? Or a man?"

"I like women," Chem snapped. "Not that I have an issue with other people's predilections. I'm a cosmopolitan mother fucker. But, yes my proclivity *is* for the fairer gender." Chem looked down into his Cowbell Oatmeal Imperial Stout and stood silent for a beat. He liked talking about his personal life even less than he liked talking about Brooke Alarawn. "There was someone, not so long ago. But you could say she's a little out of reach now."

"But not fully out of reach?" Elijah asked.

"Hope not, my man. You never know. Sometimes love takes more work than the grocery store romance novels like to admit."

Chem considered her again, for the hundredth time that day. No matter where he was or what he was doing, his thoughts always seemed to find their way back to her.

Elijah reached over and slapped Chem on the shoulder. "I don't know *that* much about you, Chem. One thing I do know, you're not afraid of hard work. You spend more time down in the lab than I do in

the library, that's for sure. Too much time. Maybe you give this girl another shot. You can't grow love in a lab, you know."

"Not yet you can't." He finished his beer, hoping to reinvigorate the mood that had slipped away seconds ago. "But I'm trying."

They sat in silence for a few minutes, each of them mulling over the conversation about love lost. Finally, Elijah nodded at the day's edition of the newspaper, left behind by another patron. "Any talk in there about strange sightings?"

Chem shook his head. "Nope. That's the way we want to keep it. As much as I appreciate your company, I'm ready for a world without magic and monsters. If you and the poet want to keep your asses out of trouble, best thing is to continue keeping your head down."

Elijah ran his palms over the table as if he were smoothing out a long sheet of paper. After the events at PPG Place, the local news had reported on sightings of The Foundry and Cold Steel. Other than some grainy security footage, there wasn't any evidence of what really took place that night, or who those mysterious figures were. All the cops found was a boardroom full of chopped up executives, a shit ton of broken glass, and one dead Brooke Alarawn.

The investigation was technically still ongoing, but after a few months, the public conversation descended into competing conspiracy theories, each more outlandish than the next. Most folks moved on to other things, happy to let the strange event slide into the realm of urban legend.

"Our thing kind of turned into a Sasquatch sighting," Elijah said. "We're lucky that all sorts of strange stuff happens in Pennsylvania."

"It's *always* Pennsylvania," Chem replied with a grin. "There was that fish girl too."

Elijah laughed and pushed his fingers through his thick dark hair and interlaced them behind his head. "The Creature that Crawled out of the Monongahela River. Yeah, when I saw those posts online about her, I knew we were in the clear. Message board blather will only make people assume it's all a load of whacko horseshit."

"Actually, maybe it would be best if we started a few more rumors on the street," Chem said, raising an eyebrow. "Aliens running around in suits, infiltrating the highest forms of government. The gods are real and they want their world back. Sci-Fi terrorists on the run from the X-Files."

Chem placed his glass on the pallet table and glanced over at the party that was starting to get loud. Overhead speakers were playing some dirty 90s rock, which riled up a good portion of the group, all of them singing along off key. The blond man at the end of the bar, the object of everyone's attention, sat looking like a king among his court. But Chem couldn't help but wonder if his smile was a con. Takes one

to know one, and all of that.

Chem turned his attention back to Elijah. "I hope you're right about my work ethic and our eventual success."

"Sure as shit," Elijah said. He held up his empty glass. "You up for one more?"

Chem shook his head. His excitement at nearly finishing devolved into excitement to actually finish. "Your cure isn't going to make itself. I better hit the lab."

"Wait," Elijah spat. "You do chemistry after four beers?"

Chem slapped him on the back. "Sometimes I go with an even six-pack. Let's get out of here before my buzz wears off."

CHAPTER SEVEN



Elijah walked beside his friend, enjoying the night air. All things considered, his life was pretty good right now. He had a couple new classes lined up for the fall. He had friends he felt he could be honest with. And of course, he did have molten steel running through his veins, but that wasn't so bad.

Studying history had taught him that no time was truly perfect, so he might as well enjoy the good things.

"You still dreaming about that woman at the bar?" Chem asked. "It's not too late."

Elijah laughed. "And do what? Invite her back to your place? She'd take one look at that shithole and run."

Chem shrugged. "It's a poor player who blames his pad."

"You're a real font of wisdom, you know that? You should have studied philosophy instead of chemistry."

"Shut up," Chem said.

"No seriously. You could be crushing the self-help market. Of course, we'd have to call you Phil instead of Chem."

"I said shut up," Chem said again, looking around. "Do you hear that?"

Elijah stopped laughing for a second, and the sound caught his ear. A car horn blaring wildly.

"What the hell?"

His question was answered before he could finish asking it. A blue station wagon, easily two decades old, came barreling down the road toward them. It swerved back and forth, clipping cars parked along the street.

It was moving fast and showed no signs of stopping.

"Get out of the way," Chem yelled. He grabbed Elijah's shirt and pulled just as the car raced past. Smoke poured from under the hood, and for a split-second Elijah caught a glimpse of the driver's face. She was terrified.

Seconds later the car slammed into a telephone pole. All the lights on the block went dark, and Elijah could clearly see the flames surrounding the engine.

"Shit," Chem said. Hands started pounding on the glass.

“What do we do?” Elijah asked, his heart racing.

“Come on,” Chem said. He ran for the car, and Elijah followed.

The flames had already taken over half the front end, and the driver’s side door was a mess of twisted metal. Chem grabbed the handle and tried to pull. He cursed, shaking out his hand.

“It’s too hot. The door’s smashed shut.” He looked at the woman, whose legs were pinned under the steering wheel, then the fire, then back to Elijah. “She doesn’t have long.”

“Maybe if we had a crowbar or something,” Elijah said.

“We have something better. We have The Foundry.”

“What?” Elijah took a step back. “What the hell can I do? I’ve never turned unless there’s a fight.”

Chem placed a hand on his shoulder. “Look at her man, she’s fighting for her life. I know you can do this.”

Elijah looked up and down the empty street. Chem was right, there was no one else.

“Shit. Okay, stand back.”

Elijah tried to focus, tried to imagine he was in a fight. But the woman kept pounding on the glass, and all he could think of was her burning alive if he failed.

He found a gap between the door and the body, widened by the collision, and began to pull. The metal immediately began to burn his hands, but he refused to let go. He strained with what little muscle he had, but the door wouldn’t budge.

The woman stared at him through the glass. He could see panic in her eyes.

A fire erupted inside of him. The pain in his hands was replaced by something far worse. The heat pressing against his body paled in comparison to the heat pouring from it. He pulled again, and the door began to bend.

He screamed as hot steel dripped from his eyes, and seconds later the door was in his hands. Elijah dropped it and grabbed the wheel, pushing it toward the windshield with all he had.

“Get her out,” he shouted to Chem, his gravelly voice full of urgency. Chem obeyed without question.

Once she was clear, Elijah took a step back, eyes locked on the car. It sat burning next to an abandoned building. By the look of the dilapidated wood paneling, the thing would go up in flames in no time. If the car blew there, the blaze could spread through half the block before the fire fighters arrived.

Up half a block toward Voodoo, Elijah and Chem had walked past an empty lot. Elijah walked toward the front of the car, placed his hands on the burning hood and began to push.

The car started to move.

If he had turned Full Foundry, this would have been a piece of cake. He could lift the car and carry it. But as he was, half man, half steel demon, it required more effort. He ignored the heat beating against his exposed skin. He strained the muscles in his legs, adding whatever strength he could to his super powered arms.

Inch by inch he made progress.

“Elijah,” Chem shouted somewhere behind him. “Leave it. That thing is going to blow.”

“No,” Elijah shouted. He kept pushing.

The empty lot came into view, surrounded on two sides by brick walls and empty street on the others. It was as good a place as he was going to find. With one final surge, he heaved forward, pushing the car up over the curb.

As he did the gas tank exploded, and he was wreathed in flame.

CHAPTER EIGHT



Normally, Bobby would refuse to let Ford push him, but as they left Voodoo for the night, the vet was too drunk to wheel himself straight, so Ford took the reins.

Bobby sang a Zeppelin tune from the jukebox, but he garbled half the words. Ford smiled. "Come on rock star, let's get you home."

They turned the corner, and it took Ford a second to register what he saw. A car covered in flames moved slowly toward them. While Ford's mind fought to make sense of it, his body already reacted.

He knocked Bobby to the ground and jumped on top of him as the car exploded.

Seconds passed, and when fire and shrapnel didn't rain down on them, Ford got to his feet. In the midst of the hollowed-out car stood a demon. Its arms were wrapped in flames and metal. Its eyes crimson. From its chest, a strange symbol glowed brighter than the fire.

"What the hell?" Ford asked.

He took a step toward the monster, but it looked up, turned, and fled. Ford almost considered giving it chase, but he couldn't leave Bobby drunk on the ground.

He stepped back and picked up his very confused friend.

"If you're gonna drive the chariot, you better learn how to steer straight, you bastard."

"Sorry," Ford replied, picking the chair up and helping his friend into it. "But did you just see that?"

Bobby giggled. "What? You haven't heard about the Mighty Metal Man? He's like, Bigfoot's best friend. Or angry uncle. Or something. Where've you been man?"

Ford stared at the burning car. He had been away from the city too long. He had walked through hell to come back here. But it looked like part of hell followed him home.

And whatever that thing was, it threatened his city.

CHAPTER NINE



The air was thick with condensation in the dank, low-ceilinged basement. Three bare bulbs lit the space. The cellar was empty except for a Pittsburgh toilet in the corner, an old-time single-speed bicycle with deflated tires, and Willa's new gear. She had set up a gym, small enough to fit the fifteen-by-twenty footprint, large enough to transform her into the woman she needed to become.

I shouldn't be here, she thought. I should be out with my friends. I should be asleep. I should be doing anything except this.

But she pushed those thoughts out of her head and renewed her attack on the worn punching bag hanging from a wooden beam, which was stained with coal ash from decades long past. She pushed away her exhaustion. Elijah had given her a work out already, but it wasn't enough to get her where she needed to go. So, she left the boys behind at the bar to exercise on her own.

She didn't let up until her hands were raw.

An old full-length mirror salvaged from the back-alley trash let her inspect the work she had accomplished over the last few months. The academic had always been rail-thin. Some might have mistaken her physique for fitness, but that was woefully inaccurate. She was simply built like a waif, a fact that had never bothered her. But Willa's security in her body shattered, along with many other things, during the melee at PPG Place in the shadow of the tower. Soon after, the magician dedicated her time into shaping her frail body into a fighting machine.

Fighting was always on her mind.

May marked a pause in her nearly ten years of teaching. Her grandfather left behind his house, a small sum of money, and the key to his office. She had moved into the first piece of her inheritance and lived modestly without work on the second. She had yet to touch his third bequest. The key hung on a chain against the wall, a silent reminder of the world she once knew.

Edwin's tiny home sat in the alley on the back lot of a larger house. It was modest but reflected the old man's tastes and temperaments. He had moved there soon after his wife passed away. Although Edwin was secular, the Jewish neighborhood of Squirrel Hill

made him feel at ease and connected to his roots.

Willa hoped it would do the same for her.

The poet-magician squeezed her fists and tightened her thighs. Muscles appeared in places they had never been before. Flexing her right hand up to her chest, she felt the biceps tense up and burn. Patches of red, darkest on her elbows, bled up toward her wrists. Her knees and shins were similarly marked—an inevitable consequence of the training. She hurt, but it was better than death.

And Willa should have been dead. She could still see the murder in Rex Bertoldo's eyes. He had been a ghost since that night at PPG, but his memory haunted her. For some reason, that big bald bull of a man had it out for Willa. She could still hear his words.

"For you. I did it all for you. Because I knew it would bring you out into the open, because I knew it would lead to this."

He spoke those words as he stood over her, knife in hand, ready to kill her and do it gleefully. She didn't know Rex from Adam and could think of no reason for his hatred. Yet, he had murdered her student, Sean. He had stolen Chem's serum and given it to Brooke. He was even there when Elijah first turned.

"I did it all for you."

None of it made sense. There was no dishonesty in his voice, but she couldn't fathom why he wanted to hurt her, why he wanted to rain chaos down around her family. Yet he had the strength to do it, the knowledge of how to manipulate her and her friends, and the will to withstand Willa's power.

No matter what she had hit him with, he got back up. Other men crumpled at the slightest poem, but Rex bore it all like a rock amidst the waves. Nothing that her grandfather taught her held any lasting impact.

It wasn't until she used Sean's poem that she finally knocked him out of the fight.

*But in this place, I am stronger,
under this town I thrive,
through this city my reach grows longer,
and with my home I rise.*

Those words filled her with power that she had never before known. With strength and confidence and a will to act. It allowed her to defeat Rex. But it also called her to go further.

Her grandfather had warned her, begged her even, to never use new magic. The canon of acceptable spells was vast, but it also had its limits, limits imposed upon wizards like her by the Guild. Edwin commanded her never to cross that line, but she was too weak without it. She broke the Guild's rules, broke Edwin's rules, and in the end, it led to his death. Her grandfather had appeared in all of his glory to

not only vanquish Brooke Alarawn, but also to cover Willa's tracks. His massive attack veiled hers from the Guild.

Willa vowed never to break that rule again. And she committed herself to never being weak enough where she should have to. So she pushed the poem away, put the professor side of her to death, and prioritized the warrior.

She tested out Taekwondo first, but it didn't fit. Its flair might have reflected an elegance she once appreciated, but her new desire transcended beauty. Then she moved to Aikido and one form of karate but found them both too passive. She discovered a match in Muay Thai—a martial art brutal enough to fit her purposes like a glove.

It would take her years to truly master it, especially since YouTube and a few cheap lessons at the local YMCA were her only coaches, but she hoped relentlessness would help make up for lost time. Judging by the bruise on Elijah's face, that wasn't far from the mark.

Her knees and elbows grew sore from the jutting attacks she performed day after day. The heavy bag took a beating, yet remained faithful to the task. The poet-magician enacted the progression again, grinding it into her bones: jab, spin, knee, elbow—turn for a spell. Her magic and her hate sustained her, along with some ancient wisdom: *mens sana in corpore sano*. A sound mind in a sound body.

She practiced her movements over and over. With every hit, the punching bag looked more and more like Rex's large bald head. She wondered where he was, what he was up to, and who he was hurting now.

Every day he existed out there unopposed was a day Willa felt guilty. Part of her was glad she didn't kill him. Edwin had warned her that new magic could shatter her inhibitions. It had turned him into a monster once, and it could do so for Willa. She managed to hold back that night, managed not to become the kind of thing she'd hate.

She had let Rex go to save Elijah, to save the city, to save herself.

But her self-control meant that Rex was still on the loose. And this time, Willa didn't have her grandfather to rely on. More than ever, she missed his wisdom and his advice. How the hell was she supposed to do this without him?

With a shout she finally broke down. Her body spent, pushed far past its limits. She fell to her knees and panted for air. And while she did, Willa looked up at Edwin's key. She pulled it from the wall and moved for the door.

CHAPTER TEN



Few stirred on Oakland's quiet streets. There were plenty of students left in Pittsburgh for the summer term, but on a night like this they were more likely to burn the midnight oil at a bar than the Cathedral of Learning. That was fine for Willa. She didn't really feel up to chatting with undergrads.

Willa slid into an elevator on the Cathedral's ground floor. She pulled the key from her bag and ran her finger against its cold, jagged teeth. Fitting it into the elevator panel, she pressed forty-two and watched the number light. Few had access to the top floor of the Cathedral, and since the battle at PPG, its only permanent resident was gone. Edwin, who'd held emeritus status at the University for years, occupied a tiny hidden office at the end of the hall, nested at the Cathedral's peak. He commanded that space for longer than she could remember. In Willa's mind, he had always been an ancient man at the top of the old tower.

Standing before the office door, she drew another key. This one was new, at least to her. Edwin had left her everything, including his office and personal effects. She had no plans for it, and wasn't even sure what drew her there that night, but she needed guidance and old habits die hard.

She touched the knob, feeling for the familiar tingle of magic. Cold brass greeted her. Edwin was gone. Though the office still smelled of his aftershave.

Her eyes cut to the massive bookcases leaning in from the outer wall. She smiled. As usual, his library had a new arrangement. She wondered if Edwin had determined one last order of books before rushing out to save them. She tried to decipher it. Not chronological or geographical, and it certainly wasn't alphabetical. She guessed the rows of books conveyed some subtle theme, masked to even the most astute readers. She laughed, wondering if his constant reordering indicated pride or mere whimsy.

Just another question without an answer.

"What should I do, grandpa?" she whispered into the empty office.

She ignored the books and turned to shuffle through the documents scattered across his desk. Her grandfather's familiar

handwriting filled reams of paper, mostly personal notes on books and poems. She sifted through the pages trying to find something, anything that could offer her advice. Not that she expected to find a note titled: **Willa's Future: Five Years Hence**. Although knowing Edwin, it wasn't entirely outside the realm of possibility.

Willa moved on from the littered desk and began wandering the room. She stopped at a small patch of wall, the only space not covered by books, and took time to admire the photographs there—the aging professor shaking hands with the luminaries of the literary world. These photos were his pride and joy, and the size of his collection never failed to impress her. Her grandfather had gotten around, meeting as many authors as he could.

Scanning the frames, she stopped at a picture she hadn't previously noticed. Most of the portraits were of Edwin and the greats, but this one was a rare group photo. A young Edwin stood off to the side, his dour countenance in place even then. The others smiled broadly. She squinted trying to discern if any of the faces were recognizable.

They weren't. Or at least she didn't think so.

She lifted the frame from its shelf and collapsed into her grandfather's chair. It was new—or rather new for this office. She was sure of it. He must have put it up after their last meeting—sometime before he ran out in his robes to fight Cold Steel. But why? This picture had been around for a while. Why place it front and center now?

With shaking hands, she turned the latches on the back and eased the aged particleboard out of its place. Flipping the frame, she gave it a little shake. The backing and photo dropped out into her hand.

Sliding her glasses up the bridge of her nose, she inspected the back of the photo.

Vox Populi, 1984, was all there was, scrawled in the perfect print of her grandfather's pen.

Willa smiled as she played the words over in her mind. Even from the grave, Edwin couldn't help but guide her path.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



Chem made sure the driver was okay before he and Elijah bolted from the scene. Cops were on their way, and they would have questions Chem had no desire to answer.

Elijah sloughed off his metal exterior in an unlit alley, and they made their way home.

After the liquidation of Alarawn Industries, Elijah had lost his fancy housing. So Chem offered to put him up. The two of them didn't last a week in Chem's old apartment in Oakland before realizing they needed more elbow room. This shithole in Homestead was a definite upgrade. Three bedrooms gave them more than enough space, and the house was within walking distance of both the abandoned mill that found new life as Elijah's testing grounds and Voodoo Brewing.

Room for books and a short walk to his new favorite haunts checked both of Elijah's boxes, but Chem would have traded that all in for the icing on the cake—the basement.

Mostly dry, which was a miracle for the area, and best of all, large enough for a completely private home lab. No more sneaking into universities, no more experimentation with the mild threat of a B&E charge. Just pure, focused chemistry. It was no Pitt or Carnegie Mellon, but the lab was his, and it would work. At least until he completed his project.

And it came complete with a makeshift operating table.

Chem helped Elijah out of his burnt clothes and surveyed the damage. Although nothing should have surprised him at this point, the rational part of his mind couldn't believe his friend had walked away from that explosion with little more than first degree burns. Chem applied his homemade burn cream, wrapped him up and sent him upstairs.

Hearing Elijah's door close, he knew the historian would be sawing logs in no time. Whatever the hell was swimming in his blood made him turn into molten steel and experience rapid healing. However, it did nothing for his alcohol tolerance, which was good in times like these. The last thing he needed was Elijah nosing around with his work on the Vida Serum. He wouldn't understand Chem's motivations, his true pursuit. But still, Chem considered it best to keep his most

significant test case close at hand.

He felt at home with his lab equipment and chemicals, but now, the stakes were raised and the clock was ticking. The answer to all his problems neared. He'd be lying if he said he didn't love the work. The power in it. In the same way that a junkie hungers for a fix, Chem craved the science. It made him feel like a better version of himself was possible, a feeling he had mostly lost after getting the boot from the academy.

Using his forged credentials to keep working at the university was no longer an option. As his personal research project intensified, his own behavior became admittedly more erratic. Paranoid that someone would report him, or worse, steal his results, kept him on constant edge.

The lab he had set up in the basement was shoddy and uncomfortable, a scientific environment that was anything but stable. Nevertheless, it kept him away from his former colleagues' prying eyes. And once he had become moderately comfortable in the environment, he grew to love the place. It held a certain mad-scientist vibe. Not unfitting for the work he set out to do.

He flipped a few switches and his busted equipment struggled to life. Money was tight, which meant that used and slipshod machines were the best he could hope for. What little cash he did have came from his questionable night job—using his defunct med school skills to patch up Pittsburghers who wanted to stay away from hospitals and questions that would come with them. But playing doctor to the gangs incurred its own risks. And worse, it kept him from his lab.

Elijah and Willa never asked how he paid the bills, and he chose to not disclose the truth. He imagined that the poet and self-proclaimed arbiter of justice wouldn't understand. And Elijah? He wouldn't have the stomach for it. So, Chem kept it to himself. Just another lie between friends. They felt it and he felt it—the walls of deception that kept him at arm's length from the ones who really cared about him.

But he had no choice, not really. Not if he was going to finish his work. And he had to finish his work.

"At least I have you guys," Chem said, tapping the metal cage. A half dozen, pale mice scurried, their pink eyes blinking at their master. "Oh, I know. There were twice as many of you last week, but that's the price of progress, boys. The price of progress."

He grabbed his notebook and added some thoughts from observing Elijah during the crash. It had all but confirmed Chem's hypothesis.

Elijah gained more control over his powers the more he tried to use them, which meant that Chem had a workable plan B. If the final product came with unintended city-destroying consequences, he could theoretically teach the user to control it. But plan B was far too risky,

at least for Chem's purposes. Which meant that Chem had to solve the volatility problem himself, something he so far had failed to do. The healing properties that came along with Elijah's transformation weren't worth the potential damage his transformation could do. He had to find a way to get the good without the bad.

His mind spun, as it always did, while he calculated the next dosage. Testing and retesting, *ad nauseum*. That was the only way. He looked back down at his mice. "Time to work some magic, boys."

CHAPTER TWELVE



Darkness covered the creature like an overcoat, giving it a sense of calm in the humid summer night. Staying in Pittsburgh's shadows was never a difficult task. Alleyways were plentiful, along with sewers. And beneath the gleaming skyline lay three dirty rivers. Even desolate streets at night provided the cover the creature craved—the comfort of walking under the sky without detection.

But tonight had nothing to do with comfort—tonight was all about the hunt. And the creature's prey was near.

Adrenaline. Instinct. Desire. These were weapons enough for this pursuit. The creature could feel its pulse quicken and beat between the slots where human ears would be.

If it were human.

The clanging of glass, beer bottles most likely, made the creature drop down on its haunches, pulling the yellow raincoat tight. Fear of exposure heightened its awareness. It waited out the laughter on a distant street. Not until the wind picked up, did it move again, following the scent that it had swirling in its nose for months. So close now, the creature could practically taste it. Craving edged out caution, and it coursed on toward its goal.

It twisted and turned between houses. Tall, wooden fences, intended to give their owners a modicum of privacy, were hardly an obstacle in its path. It scaled and crawled and slithered until finally it saw the house.

His house.

Reaching the back-basement window, it crouched low, exhaling a long slow hiss like a snake's dying breath.

Using the sleeve of its yellow raincoat, it cleared away the dirty film from the small pane of glass. The man was in there. The creature's heart raced again. He had what it needed. And there was nothing, not a thing in heaven or on earth, that would stand between the creature and its need. Reaching down, it grabbed the edges of the window, long nails prying it out of the jamb. Another deep, slow breath, and it silently dropped down into the basement, a few short strides behind the chemist.

The creature rose to its full height and opened its mouth.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



“Hello, Doctor.”

Chem felt the presence of someone in the room before he heard the hideous sound it made. He grabbed a scalpel, the only weapon within reach, as he spun. The voice rattled like a broken pipe, sending a chill up his spine. But the chill was nothing compared to the nausea that hit his gut when he saw the creature standing in the darkness.

A yellow raincoat, worn with the deterioration of what looked like a hundred years, covered most of its body. Its face, if it had one, was shadowed by the yellow, rubbery hood and obscured by the shadows cast by the overhead halogens. But still, he could see its arms, extending from the sleeves. They were milky pale, like gangrenous flesh, and terminated in what could only be technically considered hands. Not human hands. Something...else. They were webbed, like a toad's, only with bony fingers from which deadly claws protruded. Its legs, visible from the knees down, followed suit.

Chem's careful, scientific gaze did an initial sweep of the specimen that stood before him, providing him with no answers, save one. The creature that stood before him was a woman. A final moment of silence passed before he spoke. “Who the hell are you? What...*what* are you?”

“Reasonable questions.” Her tongue whipped out at him and the corners of her lipless mouth curled up into a bent smile. He thought he caught the hint of an accent in her words, but her speech was so garbled by whatever the hell she was, that he couldn't be sure. “I'm the one who's been watching you. Watching your every move.”

Chem held the scalpel higher and glanced up the stairway, in the direction where Elijah slept. “With one word, I could call judgement down on your slimy ass.”

She crossed the room before he could blink, one hand wrapped around his neck, the other gripping his wrist. The smell of dirty river hit him in the nose. “You and your friends don't frighten me, alchemist. I've been watching you all. And you don't know half of what I do. About how to fight. How to kill.” She squeezed tighter, and his scalpel clattered to the ground. Yet, she didn't ease up. “By all means, call him if you want a lesson. But I think a polite conversation

between us first would be of greater interest.”

Play it cool. Just like Miles Davis, he told himself.

“I know what I’m interested in,” Chem managed to say, “and what I’m not. And you definitely aren’t checking any of my boxes at the moment.”

She released his throat and arm and stepped back into a shadowy corner. “Maybe it’s time to broaden your horizons. Open your mind a little. Mine was certainly changed this winter by a visit to PPG Tower. I saw you, saw what your science wrought.”

“That,” Chem sighed, “that was an accident. Alarawn injected herself before I could test the formula. You can’t pin that shit on me.”

“Accidents seem to follow you.” The creature’s mouth widened, but whether it was a smile or a sneer Chem couldn’t tell. Either way, there was something in her tone he didn’t like. “But from my vantage,” she continued, “that night was a success. Or it almost was. And it’s a success you need to replicate—on me.”

Chem laughed. “What? The fangs and scales aren’t enough for you, you’re hoping to take the Ice Queen’s crown too? Well you’re shit out of luck with me, sister. I’d rather die than help you. Last thing we need is another freak on the streets.”

The creature twitched and, for the first time, looked away. Chem didn’t know how, but he’d struck a chord. If he needed to, he’d play that song all night long. Another quick glance at its claws, and he wasn’t sure how honest his bluster had been. Death was certainly on the table with this thing, and he realized he’d be one lucky son of a bitch if he got through this night in one piece.

The creature stood motionless for a moment, leaving a thick silence between them. Then it stepped into the middle of the room, under Chem’s working overhead light. In one quick motion, it tugged open the raincoat, each plastic snap giving way with a dramatic little pop. The cloak dropped to the ground, revealing the creature’s full body, which aptly matched the appendages that Chem had observed. Lythe, and standing just over five-foot tall, the figure was covered in a smooth snake skin. Pale. And tight with muscle.

But the creature’s face is what really sent Chem’s brain screaming. It was lovecraftian, like a serpent with a human skull. Two tiny black caverns sat where its nose would be. A pair of black, shark’s eyes stared at him.

“It’s not her power I’m interested in, but yours. I’m hoping that you’ll make me human again.”

Of course, Chem thought. *So, that’s the game*. The monster in front of him was a mutation looking for a cure. Not so different than Elijah. But that didn’t calm his fears, even a little. Humans could kill as easily as creatures.

"What makes you think I can help *you*, anyway?"

She nodded toward his lab table, taking stock of his chemicals with her eyes. "Because I know why you're down here, what you're working on night after night. I know that if you're successful, your project might save me. Might turn me back."

Chem considered this for a moment. Once perfected, the Vida Serum's applications would be far reaching. Maybe it could even fix the abomination standing in front of him. But he had no time to waste on pet projects.

"You know nothing," he finally sighed.

"I know more than you think. And... If you refuse..."

Chem grinned. "If I refuse, what? You'll give me a fishy kiss? I mean, I haven't gotten any for a while, but even I've got my standards."

The creature in front of him hissed. Bloodlust was written on its face, and Chem realized it might be time to mind his manners, before it put the claws to work opening him up.

Instead of giving in to her bloodlust, she played her ace card. "If you refuse, I will reveal what I truly know. About you." She reached down and pulled a manila envelope out of a pocket sewn into the interior of the raincoat. She tossed it on the table and stood up straight, giving him a dead stare.

"Nothing stays in the darkness forever, Doctor, least of all our pasts."

Chem tried not to look at it, but curiosity overrode his better judgment. He reached down, grabbed the envelope, and opened it. A stack of copied pages and photographs half an inch thick filled out the file. At first, Chem met the documents with confusion. But then it hit him.

"Where the *fuck* did you get these?" he spat. The papers quivered in his hands like leaves in the wind.

"Like I said, I've been following you for a while. You're not nearly as sneaky as you think," it hissed.

Everything in him turned over as he stared at the pictures. Chem's past, before he met Elijah and Willa, was a walk-in closet full to the gills with skeletons. This creature had crept into his basement armed with more than her teeth and claws. She had entered his past and pulled out the most damning misdeeds of the lot.

She came armed with the truth behind Vida.

Everything Chem hated about himself, everything he sought to undo, sat neatly documented in a pile in front of his eyes. His mind scrambled, failing to get a grip on his situation, find some way to turn the tables on this thing in front of him.

"I could end you with this," she said. "Hand it in to the police and

come visit you as your ass rots in prison.”

That was no idle threat, and he knew it. He thought again about fighting her, maybe calling out to Elijah for help. But she had already prepared for that line of thinking.

“Go ahead,” she hissed. “Call The Foundry. Call the poet. Odds are it would end in you mopping their blood from the floor. Or maybe they could beat me. But not before they learned the truth about you. And then you’d be friendless once again. Worse than that, you’d be divorced from your source of strength. Cut off from his blood. And then you’d stand no chance in hell of ever finishing your project. I might just tell him for the fun of it.”

She was right, about how Elijah would react. He would leave Chem if he ever learned the truth. Hell, he might just turn Chem over himself. And failing to finish the serum, that would be worse than prison. Worse than death. Vida was everything to him.

But it was everything to the creature as well. She needed the serum, needed him, which gave him leverage. Chem’s eyes shot to her webbed digits and long nails. They wouldn’t go to work on his beautiful body. Not tonight.

“You’re bluffing,” he said, gaining some of his confidence back. “Release these documents and you’ll get nothing from me. You’ll lose everything.”

“Look at me!” the creature nearly howled. “Does it look like I have anything left to lose?”

Chem stumbled backward, dropping the file. Damning evidence spread across the floor.

She grabbed her raincoat and covered herself up, then turned to the window. “You’ll do it. You’ll fix me. Or I will grind your world to dust. The clock is ticking.”

She slithered through the too small window and disappeared into the night, leaving nothing but the smell of the river and the file behind as proof she had ever been real. Chem looked down at the papers, thought through the consequences of what she was asking of him.

“I’m totally screwed.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



Early morning light pushed through the thin curtains. Elijah buried his face in his pillow and tried to ignore it. The single greatest benefit of being a professor was sleeping in during the summer months, and Elijah planned on taking advantage of every second of it.

His mattress, an old, hand me down thing, sagged in the middle, and the odd spring or two poked at him until he settled into the right spot. But, despite its age, it was relatively comfortable, and in that moment, Elijah wanted nothing more than comfort.

Everything else was pain.

His body throbbed, as it always did the morning after training. Bruises marked the spots where Willa's hands and feet had made contact. Raw, pink skin burned where his flesh turned to steel. He could only assume that his heroics of saving the woman from the car crash had increased his body's pain. And of course, his hangover provided a gnarly headache.

Some damage needed to be self-inflicted.

If Elijah had been awake enough to do a full self-assessment, he would have concluded that the pain—while agonizing—paled in comparison to when he started these tests. Muscle replaced fat, calluses formed on his hands, and Chem's magical burn lotion had come a long freaking way. The chemist was adamant about the fact that Elijah's healing properties were the most significant aspects of his changes. Whatever swam in his blood gave him the strength needed to undergo the transformation. It was possible, although not likely, that with more practice Elijah would get to the point where he wouldn't be useless the day after a fight.

He rolled over again. Despite his exhaustion, of both body and mind, it seemed sleep was done with him today. Lying under the covers wouldn't cure his headache, and there was a stack of books he had been putting off reading—prep work for the new class he had in the fall. With a groan he pulled himself out of bed.

Coffee, he thought. That was the medicine he needed first.

He threw on a ratty bathrobe and stumbled into the kitchen. A bright-eyed Willa Weil stood there waiting for him.

"We need to talk."

It took half a pot of off-brand Folgers and several requests to start over before Elijah's mind caught up with Willa's rambling.

"I'm sorry," he said, "you want to do *what*?"

She got up from her chair and started pacing. Elijah hadn't noticed at first, but she was wearing the same outfit as yesterday. Her hair looked like she had walked through a hurricane. Either she had slept in her clothes, or she hadn't slept at all.

"Look," she said. "Just look." She pointed for the third time at a loose photograph on the table. A group of academics from the eighties, Elijah guessed, based on their hair and clothes. From the looks of it, they were young, healthy, and happy. He didn't recognize any of them, except for the man in the center. It was a face—albeit it a younger version—that Elijah had seen only once before. On the night Brooke Alarawn died.

"That's your grandfather, isn't it?"

Willa nodded excitedly. "Edwin Weil: the man, the myth, the legend."

"And who are these other people?"

"I don't know." She sat down again on the lumpy couch in the living room, her manic energy doing nothing to help Elijah's headache. "Not exactly, anyway. Colleagues of my grandfathers."

"You mean at the university?"

Her eyes lit up. "No. On the streets."

She flipped the picture over. There written in neat pencil were the words *Vox Populi*.

"It's Latin. It means the Voice of the People."

"Okay," Elijah said, finishing his third mug. He still wasn't sure where all of this was headed, but he could sense the hammer waiting to drop.

"Before my grandfather died, he told me that in his youth, he and several other gifted people took it upon themselves to help the city. To fight what others couldn't fight. To save those who others couldn't save. To speak for those who lacked a voice. I don't know much about them, or what they did. But I know they made a difference."

Elijah took a breath before responding. He had heard part of this story before, which meant he had to ask the question, even if it brought him onto shaky ground.

"But wasn't it that kind of interference that—"

"That my grandfather vigorously turned his back on? Yes. It was."

They were both quiet for a moment. The sound of Homestead waking up could be heard through the thin walls.

"I've spent a lot of time thinking about this," she said. "My

grandfather knew a great many things, but he was broken, too. The things he did after my mother died, the terrible choices he made, pushed him too far. So he quit. Gave up. He buried his head in his work, hid away in his tower. But the violence that happened in February, with Sean and Brooke—a calm and focused mind couldn't have ever stopped that. A stronger hand and a determined will might have.

"If I hadn't been so passive, so willing to listen to my grandfather, maybe I could have stopped it. If my grandfather hadn't spent the last twenty years trapped behind his books...maybe none of that would have ever happened."

"But Willa—"

She cut him off short, "You're a historian. You should know better than anyone that cause and effect are tricky things to measure. It's impossible to know for certain how a few small changes in the past could influence the present. The only thing I know for certain is that what's right is right. And to take these gifts we have and bury them in the sand, it's wrong. Just damn wrong. I know you sense it too. That we have these gifts for a reason."

Willa paused and stared him long in the eyes. He felt the earth move. She shook her head and said, "Edwin's problem arose when he ventured out alone. When he gave up on the group—or them on him, I'm not sure. But what I do know is that every time I've been successful, that we've been successful, it has been *together*. A team. I need my team, Elijah. Pittsburgh needs our team."

Tears welled up in her eyes, and Elijah looked down at the picture, then back up at her. She blinked and the tears streamed down her cheeks. Willa spoke with more conviction than Elijah had ever felt about anything in his entire selfish life. Suddenly, he was no longer tired. A fire jumped to life within him.

"So," he finally said. "Where do we start?"

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



Chem woke up with a crick in his neck and a small blob of drool under his mouth. He fell asleep at the desk in his basement laboratory...again. The morning ritual had become all too familiar for the chemist as the intensity of his work increased. He rolled his neck, the strange dream about a monster, miracle cures, and blackmail came rushing back to him. He blamed the dark beers and Pete's damn food truck that parked outside of Voodoo every night. The buffalo mac and cheese was to die for... until it was to die *from*.

He stood and stretched his back, scanning the desktop for the project he was working on before sleep had overtaken him. That's when his eyes landed on the envelope—dirty and tattered and bursting at the seams. It had obviously been through hell and back, and it smelled like fish.

That's when it struck him: that *thing* wasn't a dream, but a real-life nightmare.

"*Fuck me*," Chem whispered to himself.

The conversation, the creature's yellow raincoat, and the grotesque features of its monstrous form snapped back to him, clear and vivid. Beside the envelope sat the scalpel, right where he had placed it. He cursed himself, almost wishing that he had taken a shot at filleting the beast.

He looked at the stack of papers again, assessing the danger they carried in the cool light of day. If anything, his sense of urgency increased. The creature was right, she had nothing to lose. She would release the documents if he didn't do exactly what she wanted. And that would ruin everything he'd been working toward.

The creature had him over the fire, and she was damn thorough.

As he leafed through the charts and photos, a news sense of dread dawned on him. Years had passed, and no one else had discovered this. Chem had covered his tracks well, had buried his secrets. And here they were in black and white.

There was only one place the creature could have gotten this info from.

The creature had been to visit *her*. But Chem needed to be sure. He reached for his bag, but a loud thump from overhead stopped him.

He glanced up at the stairs. Footsteps stomped overhead as if a marching band were practicing in the living room. Elijah was still home. As far as Chem could tell, the historian had never gone snooping among Chem's stuff, but he couldn't put trust to that now. If the historian stumbled across this blackmail, he wouldn't understand its contents. He couldn't. The information was damning, and Chem knew that if he were pressed, the depths of his guilt and shame might just emerge.

Picking up the envelope, Chem cursed again. His eyes scanned the room, searching for a place to hide its contents from any prying eyes that might make their way down into the basement.

He pulled a stool over from his work bench, stepped up on it, and reached over his head to lift one of the dirty dropped ceiling panels. A little cliché for a hiding spot, but it was going to have to do in the short term. He felt like a kid again, hiding a low-grade nudie mag from his parents.

After gently placing the tile back where it belonged, Chem smoothed his clothes and headed upstairs.

As he crested the steps, Chem could hear Elijah's voice from the living room. "How the hell should I know? It's not like I've done this before."

Chem recoiled a bit. After the shitstorm he had just experienced in his basement, the last thing he needed was to walk into an argument between Elijah and Willa. But then he heard her laugh.

"Come on, Mighty Metal Man. How hard could it be?"

Chem stood in the doorway and let the argument play out.

"Listen, I'm not screwing around here. Even with our...our...powers, we're still human. This is going to take some planning."

Chem cleared his throat and stepped into the room. "Don't mind me. Just your average everyday scientific mastermind trying to get some coffee. And no evil villain jokes, I know I meet all the tropes."

"All right, Mr. Glass," Elijah sneered.

"Samuel L. Jackson played him. That a black joke?"

"No. Shit no... Chem... I was...it's because you..." Elijah fumbled over his words.

Willa laughed with her hand over her mouth. "He's messing with you, Elijah."

"Oh...right."

The professors dropped on the couch, smiling at him like a couple of fools. After his experience with the creature in the basement and only a couple hours of shit-sleep on a hard wooden table, their level of authenticity made him want to tear their heads off.

"What about you, Percy?" Willa winked. "You want to help us save

the world?"

"Well I gave up on using straws last year. That count? Or are you talking like, voting for world peace or something? That's a raw deal for scientists. We thrive on military spending."

Elijah laughed. "She means using the gifts we have to do some good, right here, right now, in the city."

Shit, Chem thought.

Willa showed Chem the photo of the *Vox Populi* and explained her plan, at least the beginning of it. The whole thing seemed woefully under-thought, and Chem let them know it.

"Sounds like a smart way to end up dead. Or worse."

"Come on," Willa said. "You know as well as any of us that this city's got some real problems. And I think it's about time we tried to help. We could use you on our side."

"Sorry, I've got stuff to do. And the world's a damned big place."

"Chem, we're not talking about the world," Elijah said, his voice raised a little this time. "We're just saying that there are people out there that need help. And there's plenty of bad juju out there. You guys always yap about loving Pittsburgh. It's just time to do something about it."

Chem sighed. They weren't wrong, necessarily. He knew firsthand how effective the two book worms could be, and he knew that they'd likely crash and burn without his help. But he had so much on his plate right now, he couldn't even begin to deal with their good intentions. The creature's words echoed in Chem's mind: *The clock is ticking*. This stupid hero talk was the last thing he needed. So he took a breath, and tried to shut it down.

"Elijah, don't be a stupid son of a bitch." And then Chem turned to Willa. "And you. I'd expect more from you than trying to get this guy all riled up over becoming something he's not. He would follow you off the Fort Pitt Bridge if you asked him to. But he's an historian. You're a freaking poetry teacher. You're not heroes. If you guys go looking for trouble, you're gonna find it. And I might not be there to patch you up when the shit goes sideways. You're liable to get yourselves killed. Or worse... get *me* killed."

Chem shook his head as he turned and walked toward the kitchen. He poured a cup of coffee out of the second pot that Elijah had already made. The dark brew was lukewarm. It didn't matter. The chemist just needed the caffeine to jumpstart his day. Well-balanced breakfasts be damned.

His memory of that thing in the basement mixed with his words with Willa and Elijah. He leaned over the counter, letting his forehead rest on the cheap Formica. He exhaled.

I can be a real dick sometimes, he thought.

Elijah and Willa were the closest things he had to friends for a long time, at least—since *her*. Past experience proved that acting like a self-righteous asshole was an easy way to screw it all up. He took another breath, then tried again.

He slung his bag over his shoulder and walked back out to the living room where Elijah and Willa sat silently on the couch. Willa opened her mouth to speak, but he held up one hand, stopping her before the words came

"Listen, I didn't mean to be such a super-prick. I have a genetic predisposition toward it. You should have met my gramma. I get what you're saying, with great power... blah, blah, blah. I'm just worried for you guys. That's all. You're powerful, true. But you're not invincible. Last February should have proven that to you."

That blow landed. He could see the pain in both their faces.

"Look," Chem said, softening his voice. "I gotta run some errands. Don't do anything stupid while I'm gone, okay?"

They both nodded like schoolchildren who had just been chided by the teacher. He forced a smile even though joy felt as close as a distant star. He told himself that it was for their sake, as he turned for the door and left.

Taking the two stairs in one step, Chem hit the streets of Homestead. He looked up and down the road. The streets were still relatively quiet for a weekday morning. He couldn't help but feel at home in the old rundown neighborhood. The way that the simple folks on that side of the river were trying to make it thrive again impressed him. Their work as neighbors weren't much different than his studies in the lab. All of them trying to heal something broken. But this neighborhood, like so many others in the Steel City, fought an uphill battle. Pittsburgh might just need heroes after all. But right now, he had a much more important task at hand.

Chem pulled out his phone and called for an Uber. Normally he took public transportation across town. But it was getting late, and he had to get to Allegheny General Hospital, stat. He needed to retrace the creature's footsteps. He needed to visit *her*.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



Fluorescent lights assaulted Chem from above as the smell of antiseptic surrounded him. No matter how many times he had entered the building, he still felt that familiar flutter in his gut. He hated this place and was drawn to it. It contained everything he loved in this world and housed his greatest shame. In an attempt to comfort himself, he ran his fingers over the smooth laminate of the fake ID in his pocket. It was trustworthy. He'd used it many times before, and it had never failed him.

He took a left then a right and then went through a set of doors. He'd walked the path so often he knew every faded tile by heart. Two days a week, every Tuesday and Thursday, without fail, for the last five years. Chem had discovered a dozen different places to get what he needed for his basement science experiments. But this hospital held something more important than any of that.

Approaching the sign-in desk, he grimaced. A new face sat behind the counter. Sherry, the regular nurse on duty, was nowhere in sight.

Family only. The policy was bulletproof.

It had taken Chem nearly three months of charm, donuts, and establishing his alternative identity to talk his way into the ward. Now, everyone just assumed he had access. Everyone except for the dour face looking back at him over the reception desk.

"May I help you?" the stranger in Sherry's seat asked.

"I hope so. Where's Sherry?" Chem answered.

"Flu." Apparently, this one wasn't much for words.

"Occupational hazard, I guess," Chem said with a friendly laugh. She didn't even give him a smile. "You're new here then, right?"

"Yep." There was bite in the clipped way she spoke, which didn't bode well for Chem's chances. Still, he had to try. "May I help you?" She enunciated each word as if Chem were an idiot. He could have been for all she knew.

"Right. Sorry. I'm here to visit Room 3." He chose not to use the patient's name.

The nurse pulled out a clipboard from under the desk and flipped through the pages. "Name?"

"Henry." Chem held his breath. It'd been so long since Sherry had

asked, he'd nearly forgotten his alias.

She glanced up at him. "Last name?"

"Williams." Chem shot the last name just as it came to mind.

The nurse furrowed her brow. "You mean like, Hank Williams?"

"Yeah. Daddy was a big country fan." He shrugged. "I'm more of a Beatles guy, myself."

Sweat started to beat up on Chem's forehead. He watched the nurse as she glanced at the paper then back up at him and then down again.

"Identification?" she asked, without looking up.

Chem pulled the ID out of his pocket and slid it across the counter. He drummed his fingers on the countertop, hoping he hadn't been made.

Her hand moved toward the phone, and Chem was certain that he'd soon be joined by security.

But security beat her to the punch.

"Hank! What's up, my man? She's back there waiting for you." A thick Latino man nearly bursting out of his hospital guard uniform came around the corner. His voice was always louder than necessary, and Chem watched the woman behind the desk grimace. "And you should know to never leave a lady waiting."

The guard drew closer and shot his hand out toward him. Chem grabbed it and pulled the man into a bro hug, crushing their hands between them.

"Yeah, Jorge. It's cool. I'll be there soon. This new lady here, she's just making sure I'm legit. Doing her job."

Jorge turned toward the nurse. "What's your name again?"

"Sheila," the woman whispered. "It's a temp position."

Jorge smirked and nodded. "It's cool, Sheila. Hank here, he's a regular. Comes twice a week to visit our gal. He's damn near her only visitor. I'll vouch for him."

Sheila's eyes darted from Jorge back to Chem and then down to the clipboard. Clearly, she didn't want to put her new temp job in jeopardy. Chem did his best to ease her mind. "It's okay," he said to Jorge. "She's just doing her job. I mean, I wouldn't want some stranger creeping in here."

"Hell yeah," Jorge said, glancing over his shoulders to see if anybody of any importance had heard him curse. "Morning visiting hours don't last forever though. You better get your ass back there. She's never gonna forgive you for being late. Bet you're on thin ice already."

Chem felt the warmth of his body all gather up in his cheeks. He clenched his teeth and said, "If this is the worst I've ever done to her, we'd both be happy as clams."

"I know that story," Jorge laughed a deep bellow. "My sweet *esposa* has a damn laundry list on me. Most forgiving soul in Pittsburgh."

Chem patted Jorge on the arm and then glanced back down Sheila. "I'm okay then?"

Without saying a word the woman nodded. Chem gave her one more winning smile and thanked her profusely. "I hope to see you back here again soon, Sheila." With a wink, he was gone.

The sound of Chem's footfalls echoed around him, like they always did. He walked faster than usual, the rhythm of his shoes like a drum beat.

Visiting hours *were* almost over, but he knew the truth was that once inside that room none of the regulars would bug him, not for a while at least. They were happy that someone was visiting the patient. They all assumed that she was an out-of-towner, a transplant with no one nearby. Chem knew differently.

He walked past two supply closets and stopped at Room 3. Chem looked around to make sure no one was watching, an old habit, then took a breath and entered the room.

The cold white hospital room held one patient, a woman in her thirties. She was beautiful, even with the tubes running out of her nose and mouth. Long dark hair flowed down around her face.

"Hello, Vida" Chem smiled. "Did you miss me?"

He walked across the room and pulled the two-day-old flowers out of the vase on her bedside table, replacing them with a fresh bouquet of posies, which had been tucked up under his arm. "Much better, right?"

Before sitting down, he opened the curtains, letting light into the room. The window, five stories up, looked out over the city. The window didn't open fully, hardly more than a six-inch gap, but Chem checked to make sure it was locked tight anyway. A greasy smear ran across one pane, and Chem noticed a long scratch on the brick sill outside.

The thought of the creature scaling the building and squeezing through into Vida's room made him shudder, but he pushed the idea away. Now wasn't the time to let fantasy overtake him.

Chem grabbed the room's one chair and dragged it over to her. The wooden legs scuffing along tile bugged his ears.

"Sorry I'm late. I overslept." He paused as if listening. "No, no, I wasn't drinking. Well, not too much. Just a bad nights sleep. Nightmares. But I'm better now that I can see you."

Chem reached out and took Vida's hand in his, careful not to disrupt the tube going into a faint blue vein running down the inside of her arm. He interlaced his long dark fingers between her tiny ones.

Her hands were cold, as usual. They felt lifeless, like plastic. Reaching up, he pushed her hair back with his free hand, tucking the dark locks behind her ear. He slid his knuckles gently down her smooth cheek. In his imagination, her eyes opened, and a broad smile spread across her face. But, like every other time, there was nothing. No sparkling gaze. No smile.

She wasn't there.

His heart broke, like every other visit. Chem raised her hand to his face, and leaned forward, gently kissing her ashen-white skin. He blinked, sending two tears running down his cheeks. For the first month or so, crying put him off. At first, he chided the act as weakness. Emotions had never been his specialty. But now, those tiny drops of salty water were like clockwork and a sign of his contrition.

Gently, he placed her hand by her side and leaned back in his chair.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. It always started this way. A quiet confession of guilt. But then, like all the other times, he smiled. "It's good to see you, my dove. Even like this."

Chem let the silence settle in the room, so different from how their time together used to be. When he had first met Vida, they never stopped talking. Laughter, debates, stories—they couldn't stop sharing their lives with one another. The only times the quiet reigned were when the two of them fell asleep in her apartment.

They met in the lab, and their mutual love of science laid the foundation for their eventual love of each other. Vida opened up the world to him, showed him how much more there was to living than equations and Bunsen burners.

Back then, he dreamed of glory. Of cracking the chemical code that kept humans trapped in their shells, from realizing their true potential. He imagined a world where made to order science could make people stronger, faster, smarter—and he could practically taste the riches that would come his way once he figured it all out.

Everything changed once Vida got sick.

There were no known cures, and all available treatments only served to make her weaker. She needed something new, something outside the bonds of traditional medicine. She needed the Vida Serum.

Chem's dreams of glory died that day, and he devoted every waking second to perfecting a cure. While he no longer wanted to make it rich creating super soldiers, he knew that his research along those lines held the answer.

Vida trusted him, trusted his science. And that dual love landed her here. She agreed that there was no time to test the serum, no time for research board approval. So, in the dead of night, Chem broke the law for the first time—he used the serum on her.

The results were less than optimal.

At first, everything proceeded on course. The disease ravaging Vida's body dissipated—Chem could see the life coming back to her eyes. Strength returned to her wasted frame. But then a new pain took over. She spent the night screaming as Chem tried to figure out what had gone wrong. Worse than the screams was the silence that followed, a silence that had remained unbroken ever since.

The medical school could never prove what he had done, but they ejected him from the program anyway, just months before finishing his degree. But he never quit trying.

Chem exhaled. He could never stay here long. The shame he felt every time he looked at her threatened to overwhelm him. And shame wouldn't save her. But he couldn't leave yet, not until he told her the truth. He could lie to anyone, his family, his friends, but never to her.

"I'm going to fix you, Vida. Every day, I'm getting closer. I can feel it. I thought I was there months ago. Before everything went to shit." He laughed and imagined her retort. "I know, I know. Good thing I didn't try that serum on you back then. You would've been like an iceberg laying there, and still unconscious. Who the hell knows what I would've done to you?"

Chem paused, scratching his chest as he admired the lines on her face. If he imagined hard enough, she could be laying in his bed sleeping like on so many of those peaceful, wet Pittsburgh mornings. But his mind would not let the deception stand for long.

"There's a problem. I would've told you sooner, but it just came up." He imagined her response. "No. No. Not a problem with the serum. Something else. Someone else. This creature...this thing...it has information on me. On us." Somehow, the creature had dug up his past. She found the proof that the medical school never did, proof enough to send him to prison. And worse, Chem had promised Elijah that he would stop working on the serum. After what happened to Brooke, it was the only way Chem could convince him to stay, convince him to keep testing his blood. If Elijah knew the truth about how Chem spent his evenings, if he knew that Chem had been destroying lives for a decade, he'd slam the door and never return.

No, Chem needed to keep up the lie. He couldn't stop, not until Vida was safe. Which meant dealing with the creature. That thing in his basement was just another move in the game. Another step toward the true goal of healing Vida.

"I'm just not certain," he whispered. "If I tell the others, I could lose them. If I try to fight her, I could lose everything. But if I do what she wants..."

The door squealed open and Chem's head pivoted toward it. Jorge looked at him, the jovial man's face absent of any joy. He held one

finger up, telling him that his time was limited. A simple nod answered Jorge, and the guard left Chem to his farewells. Jorge did all that he could, but there were limits to mercy, even in the ward.

Chem looked back down at her. "It's time. I have to go. But I think things will move more quickly now. Do this for me, will you? If you can hear me, think on that last time, that last day in Frick Park." A smile returned to Chem's face. It was soft, authentic, with a trace of sadness and shame. It may have been the only real expression he allowed himself to show since the last time he was in that room. "You were wearing that dress, the one I like. We laid on the blanket and watched those college kids throwing Frisbee. Remember that? It's the first time you said it to me. I'm sorry that I didn't return the favor. But I need you to know, *I love you, too*. And I will do whatever, *whatever*, to bring you back to me."

Chem closed the door quietly behind him. The latch clicked in its familiar clack. With all his knowledge of the medical world, he knew that the sound of a slamming door wouldn't disrupt her. But the kind of reverence he held for the woman required gentleness in every move. He glanced to the right down the hallway, toward the nurse's station. Not wanting to see Sheila again, or anyone, so he turned left instead.

He'd been coming long enough to know the layout of the hospital as well his childhood home. Crossing through two different wards, he took a back service exit out into the alley behind the hospital. The smell of rot hit him from a dumpster close by. Instinctually, his hand drew up to his nose.

"So," a voice hissed, "do we have a deal?"

Chem spun on his heels and found himself face to face with the creature. "What the *fuck* are you doing here?" He didn't let her answer. "You stay the hell away from her. That is non-negotiable."

"You're not my master." She stared at him deadpan for a beat. "You're not in the position to make demands, Doctor. I told you I've been watching."

Chem's eyes narrowed. Rage grew up in his gut, and again he thought about attacking the thing. He clenched a fist but then relaxed. "If your scaly ass needs me so badly, I might be the master after all. No matter what kind of shit you have dug up. Don't think that my reputation, or even my life, means more to me than *she* does. I'll bring down the sun before a hair is plucked from her head."

The creature took a step back, without giving any ground. "That wasn't always true, was it? She made a fine specimen."

"Fuck you."

"Do we have a deal or not," she asked, as if he had not said a word.

Chem sighed. The thing had him, and he knew it. But that didn't mean that the creature couldn't be useful. Chem's long years of work had told him how to find value in even the lowest of places, even if that meant going low himself.

"Yeah. Yeah, we got a deal." He unclenched his fists. "But if we're gonna be working together, I can't just call you Fish Sticks. What do you go by?"

"It's..." The creature hesitated, as if trying to find the answer. "My name is Rita."

Chem knew that this was the way forward. But if she wanted something from him, she was going to need to work for it. Vida was too important to let an opportunity like this pass him by. "Okay, Rita, I'll help you. But I'm going to need something from you first. A task that fits your particular skill sets."

"Tell me," she whispered with a smile.

Chem sighed. "We need some new test subjects."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



For months, Ford wanted nothing more than to lay on his back in the shade on a hot Pittsburgh afternoon. But his dreams didn't quite match the situation he found himself in today. The shade was provided by the undercarriage of his 93 Ford Ranger, which hadn't held up too well through three years in storage behind his mom's old place. Elevated on a couple of old jack stands, the truck cursed with creaks and ticks as Tim cursed right back at her. Reaching down to his side, he grabbed a wrench and tried to fit it on the rusted-out, old bolt.

"Shit!" He shouted as sweat dripped into his eyes. He flung the wrench out from under the truck. It clanged against the wheel of Bobby's chair.

"Hell, Ford. Just because your ride's kicking your ass today, doesn't mean you have to take it out on my sweet stallion." For good measure, Bobby tilted up and held a wheelie while laughing in the sun.

"I need a 7/8ths."

Bobby let his front wheels drop to the ground, and he pushed himself over to the makeshift workbench they had set up with a piece of plywood suspended between a couple of old chairs they found in the alley. Bobby grabbed the wrench, spun, and dropped it toward Ford, making sure it landed within reach.

"Hey, you remember that dude that we used to send to the motor pool for tools?" Bobby asked.

Ford's fingers wrapped around the wrench. He paused, and then burst out laughing. "You mean Jack Out?"

"Yeah. Jack Out. That's him. Why the hell did we call him Jack Out?"

Ford started laughing again. "You don't remember?"

"Nah, man. I really don't."

Ford slid out from under the truck and pushed himself up onto his elbows. He was happy to take a break, especially for a good story. "He was the guy that Smitty caught beatin' off in the head. Damn fool didn't even lock the door."

Bobby's straight face broke into a grin. "You never forgot to

though, did you, Ford? You locked the door a half-dozen times a day.”

Tim ignored him. “When Smitty caught him, he started giving the poor guy the business. Jack Out—I think his name was actually Henshaw or something—he just kept screaming ‘shut the door, shut the door. Out. Out. Out.’ I guess instead of calling him Jack Off, they called and Jack Out.”

Ford scooted back on his rear and leaned against the truck. The old girl creaked against his weight, and then finally settled in. She was trustworthy. Almost as trustworthy as Bobby, who grabbed the water bottle from between his legs and tossed it over to Ford before he had to ask for it. Bobby was always like that, ready to give whatever the men needed in a heartbeat. As Ford slugged down the icy-cold water, he listened to Bobby still laughing.

“Tim,” Bobby said—he almost never call him Tim, “it’s damn good to have you back. Almost like the old days.”

“Almost.” Ford’s eyes cut to Bobby’s wheelchair, and that familiar sense of guilt hit him in the gut.

They had been in country for months, nearing the end of their second tour. None of it was glamorous, but they were together, fighting a fight they both believed in. They’d get their mission, do their duty, and come home. And Ford and Bobby were damn good at their jobs. Life was fine for Ford.

Until everything went to shit.

An ambush, a desperate situation, a choice. That’s all it took.

Bobby shook his head and said, “Don’t even go there, man. You gotta get the accident out of your damn head. Look at me. I’m happy.”

Ford nodded. “I know. It’s just... Nothing’s normal about this shit.”

“Tell me about it. People look at me like I’m The Foundry or something.”

Ford stared at his friend. “About that. Last night, what we saw...”

Bobby laughed. “We were drunk off our asses man. We saw a car accident, nothing more.”

Ford pictured the man standing in the middle of that car accident. He saw the metal on his arms and the fire burning in his chest.

“Tell me about them.”

Bobby sighed. “Tabloid nonsense, been going on for months after the accident at PPG Place. People claiming they saw fire monsters or melting men or ice queens. Just bullshit. And there’s that alligator or whatever that supposedly lives in the river, drags unsuspecting tourists back to its lair.”

Ford grunted, his mind still on the burning man. If Ford hadn’t been there to protect Bobby, what could that thing have done to him.

“You know how people get,” Bobby continued. “They get bored or they get scared, and they make stuff up. Pittsburgh’s perfectly safe, I

can assure you.”

Ford looked up from his boots. He smiled at his friend.

“You’re right. Total bullshit. Probably caused by those shots Mike was buying for everyone.”

Bobby laughed. “He was trying so hard to impress Becca.”

“And failing,” Ford said. “He probably ran up quite a tab.”

“Speaking of which,” Bobby said. “How are you planning on paying down your tabs, now that you’re back in town? I mean, I appreciate you spending your days here keeping lonesome old me company and all. But have you thought about finding a job?”

Ford sighed. “I don’t know, man. Seems so weird, earning a paycheck without making something bleed.”

“It will be good for you,” Bobby said. “Help you to settle back into life here. And it will be freaking great for me.”

Ford arched an eyebrow. “How so?”

“The sooner you get a job, the sooner you get off of my couch. I love you like a brother, but you’re killing my game, man. How am I supposed to bring back the ladies with you snoring away in my living room?”

Ford laughed and threw the water bottle back at Bobby. “Screw you. I’ll get a job tomorrow. For now, tell me another story about old Jack Out while I try to get this damn bolt off.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



Rita's stomach growled. But it was a hunger absent of desire, instinct devoid of appetite. She didn't want to eat, didn't want to hunt. She dreamed of life before this body, before it's needs.

And she pictured the man who could give her that life once again.

Chem could do it, she had few doubts about that. But whether or not she could trust him to carry through on his word was another matter entirely. He had said yes, albeit under duress. Rita was more than willing to pay the price he asked in response. But she couldn't deny the possibility that the chemist was working her somehow. Deception marked his days, and desperation his nights. She'd leverage the powerful confluence of his emotions as far as she needed to, but it made him unstable, which came with plenty of risks, risks Rita had spent years avoiding.

Once, she had been human. A beautiful young woman, pursuing life and love and her career. Then she came to Pittsburgh, and everything changed.

Now she was nothing more than what the tabloids called her.

Rita lurked through the back alleys, taking care not to be seen. Dusk obscured her trail, and her yellow raincoat did its job covering her hideous form. With the river in view, she leapt over a barrier and scrambled down the rocky slope, before slipping through the old culvert that led into the sewers. She knew the route by heart.

Her bony knuckles brushed against the old brick walls as she climbed into the subterranean cavern. She would soon leave by a different route, one that would lead her into the heart of the city, and take her closer to her new prey, the one that Chem needed. But that could wait until the darkness of the city deepened.

A few turns through the dank corridor, and she stepped through the tight space into an open room, the closest thing she had to a home. Light seeped in from a drainage grate overhead, granting just enough glow for her to make out the rudimentary dwelling. A bed made of pallets and a castaway mattress were shoved against one wall. She had filled the rest of the room with pieces of once loved furniture, now not good enough for the human world.

Turning a chair, she sat in front of the long wall. Her heart raced

as she thought of the chemist again and the promises he made. But she pushed the excitement down. She hadn't survived this long by playing the fool, and she knew she couldn't trust the emotion—or the man. She trusted nothing but herself.

Reaching her long, sinewy arm down, nearly to the floor, she felt for the cord that stole electricity from the city somewhere out in the darkness of the tunnels. She flicked a switch, and the light flashed on. Her hunter's eyes adjusted in a heartbeat, and the image, painted on the brick and mortar wall, came into view.

In the bottom right-hand corner, Rita took in the rounded cheekbones and pointed chin on the image of an elementary school girl. Her eyes were set wide apart and the nose had a symmetrical form. Dark, curly hair fell down past her shoulders. The girl could have been a child model, or a cherub—perfect in every way.

Rita stood and approach the painting. She ran her savage nails over the girl's brow.

The masterpiece before her had unfolded over hundreds of hours of toil. Rita stared at the little girl's eyes, remembering them as once her own, and followed the direction of the child's gaze. The landscape was something like Central Park on a clear June day, but instead of Manhattan, it was a city of her own imagination.

It was paradise.

Perfect.

The scene moved. It stretched past the girl toward the left side of the wall; the serene cityscape devolved into a skyline of destruction, becoming a dystopian mess where the painting faded back into the crumbling sewer wall. Dream met cruel reality. Her reality. The green of the park turned yellow then brown then black. The earth was decimated. It was beauty destroyed; paradise lost.

But not for long.

Rita found the right shade of paint and got to work. As she moved, her deformed body, her terrible history, disappeared. She was herself again, caught up in creating something beautiful. She stepped back and admired the drying paint.

Now, the young black girl's eyes were no longer on the destruction of the city. Instead they looked up toward the top left-hand corner. There, the sun assaulted the filth and darkness, casting beams upon the dead cityscape. A small flower emerged, struggling to find warmth amongst the sun's rays, bringing life back to this dead world.

It was hope.

It was her.

But that flower's fragile beauty couldn't last on its own, couldn't survive the cruel world surrounding it. Not without the right fertilizer. Blood needed to water that flower, and Rita knew where to find it.

She dropped the paint cans and fled the sewer. The night welcomed her, giving her more than enough cover for the work she set out to do.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



Willa spotted him by pure chance.

After Chem left, she and Elijah continued their conversation. The scientist made fair points. But Willa had the moral high ground, and it didn't take long to convince Elijah that there was little harm in at least giving it a try. They planned on meeting back up at the boys' place around sundown.

Willa went home and spent the rest of the day preparing for their first foray into the world of nighttime heroics. The thought of using her power productively filled her with a certain thrill, and she couldn't wait to get started, to step into this new life. So, when the sun began to set, Willa fed the cat, ran through her spell book one last time, then caught the bus. Construction on Beachwood diverted the bus down a small brick street, which is where she saw *him* on the sidewalk.

A giant bald man in an impeccable suit.

"Rex," she shouted as she shot out of her seat.

The bus went two more blocks before she could get the driver to stop. Willa jumped out while as the doors were easing shut and sprinted back up the street, anger and curiosity coursing through her veins. But the anger that motivated her quickly turned to panic. He was gone. Vanished, yet again. She turned left, then right, wildly looking for any trace of him. She feared the worst, until she caught a glimpse of a figure a block's length away from her up a steep hill. The man turned a corner, then was gone out of sight.

She rushed after without a second thought.

The rational side of her brain told her to slow down, to be wary of a trap. But stronger forces were at play than the power of rationality. Willa couldn't stop, not when he was so close. If it was a trap, she'd have to break it, just like she planned on breaking him. She needed answers, needed to know the truth, needed to know why her grandfather had to die.

Sprinting through the small neighborhood, she bumped past pedestrians enjoying the last minutes of city sunlight. Twice she thought she lost him, but his size made him easy enough to track. His massive bald head stood out above the other people, parked cars, and

other obstructions.

Rex made his way into a large cemetery. Willa slowed as she entered through the gate.

The park took up several city blocks, with a sprawling network of paths through the headstones. Trees broke up her line of sight, but they would do so for him as well. Now that she had him so close, she decided to exercise tact. She walked slowly, trying not to look like she was creeping. Her course wound close to the tree line, allowing her to hide at a moment's notice, but she never took her eyes off of him.

He moved quickly down a side path, and Willa had to leave her tree cover to follow. A quick glance confirmed that they were alone, and in the growing darkness, she figured she wouldn't make much of a scene. She crouched low and moved among the graves.

Stopping at a tombstone not far off the footpath, he stood rooted. Minutes that felt like hours passed, and he didn't move an inch. Willa caught a glimpse of something dark in his hands.

She pictured his large knife in her mind, imagined what it would feel like sliding through her flesh.

The night was quiet, traffic no more than a distant hum in the background. Willa crept as close as she dared, holding her breath every time her shoes made the slightest sound in the dried-out summer grass. Two poems came to mind, but there was no way to cast them without alerting Rex to her presence before they took effect. If she wanted the element of surprise, she'd have to use her newfound martial skills.

Willa sucked in air, then charged.

Two steps from him, her shoe scuffed against a stone, making a loud scraping sound. The man jumped and began to turn. Willa was ready for this. She cocked one arm back, words on her lips ready to follow the attack with a spell, just like she had practiced. But the punch never landed, the spell died unspoken. Instead, she stood there frozen, staring at his face.

A bushy mustache sprouted from underneath his pinched nose. Small, sad eyes looked back at her in confusion.

This man was not Rex Bertoldo.

"What are you doing?"

Willa's eyes jumped from his face to the bouquet of dark roses in his hand. "I...I'm sorry."

She turned and sprinted, shame driving her steps. Without needing to look back, she knew he wasn't chasing after her. Why would he?

Bells rang out from a nearby church, but Willa didn't hear them. She ran, only stopping to catch her breath once she made it past the front gates. Laughter nearly overtook her when she considered the absurdity of stalking some mourning stranger. Rex was out there, she

knew it. But she couldn't attack every bald head in the city to find him. She made a mental note to check her "bald man biases," then turned to see if she was near a bus top. As she started walking down the street, the bells stopped ringing, which is when Willa realized the time.

She took a deep breath, then started sprinting once more, hoping that Elijah hadn't left without her.

CHAPTER TWENTY



Elijah's ass had gone numb. He'd spent the last hour sitting on a cinderblock watching from a rooftop as drunk college kids went in and out of bars below him on Carson Street. It wasn't the best view, but it had taken the historian the better part of forty minutes to find a way to the top of the apartment building, and he wasn't looking forward to climbing back down only to try again elsewhere.

He checked his watch.

Midnight. Four hours into his vigilante career, and he had jackshit to show for it.

After his conversation with Willa that morning, Elijah spent the day on edge. He was anxious, excited, and terrified all at once. He tried to get a jump on prepping for his fall semester, but teaching history seemed so petty in light of what he was about to do. This was no job for a professor.

But beneath all the nerves, Elijah also felt some semblance of peace, as if a part of him knew that tonight would be the beginning of something he was meant for.

Willa had spoken the words that he had been trying and failing to verbalize for months. Whether it was some remnant of Gabriel calling to him, or his own growing sense of moral duty, Elijah couldn't be sure, but his days of hiding behind cowardice and self-interest were over. He was going to use his power to help people.

At least he was going to try. Turned out, being a hero was easier said than done.

Failure number one: Willa was a no show.

They had planned to meet at Elijah and Chem's around sunset, but after twenty minutes of biting his nails and calling her cell, he decided to just head out on his own. Staying in didn't even cross his mind. If he didn't at least try, he was likely to explode.

But where to go?

Failure number two.

Pittsburgh wasn't a large city, but it resisted easy navigation, especially for newcomers. With its rivers and bridges and tunnels, every previous attempt Elijah took to explore ended with him getting hopelessly lost. He knew his route between Homestead and the

universities in Oakland pretty well, but after that he had to rely on the fickleness of the GPS.

He wanted to steer clear of where they lived in case someone recognized him, so he decided to check out Shadyside. He vaguely remembered reading in the newspaper about a murder that happened there a couple of weeks ago.

The small neighborhood didn't live up to its name. He searched but found boutique stores and well maintained homes and nothing much in the way of overt violence.

He drove North to East Liberty. It certainly looked the part. During his time researching Pittsburgh for Alarawn Industries, he had read a little about the area. A once thriving neighborhood turned slum due to racist housing policies and short sighted urban renewal plans. It was a moral failure on behalf of those in power at the top, and violent crime tended to fester, affecting those without power at the bottom.

But, despite its reputation, violence didn't exactly flood the streets. Elijah walked around for over two hours and found nothing worth getting involved in. For the most part, he saw only a sleepy neighborhood, content to leave him alone and be left alone in return. Maybe it had something to do with the Whole Foods that had moved in a few years earlier.

Elijah's first hit came when he stepped into a tiny corner store to buy a coffee. A police scanner sat behind the counter, squawking nonsense, until he heard several cops responding to a fight at a beer distributor on Penn Ave. But by the time Elijah got there, it had already been broken up. Bored, tired, and more than a little deflated, Elijah had decided to make his way to Pittsburgh's South Side.

Bars and clubs lined East Carson street, with a couple stories of apartments layered on top. The strip was known as the party spot for university students and twenty-somethings living the nightlife. Too many people crowded the spot for anything really dire to take place. Whatever crime happened here went on beneath the surface, too deep for Elijah to find. All he expected to see was some drunken disorderly action—not something fit for a proper avenger.

He sighed, checked his watch again, then decided to head home. *Maybe this just isn't for me*, he thought. *Let the cops handle Pittsburgh's crime.*

As he got to his feet, a sharp bang rang out behind him. He turned, fists balled, ready for action. Instead he found only a poet.

"How goes it, Batman?"

He smiled at Willa. "If I'm Batman that makes you Catwoman, right?"

"If you suggest I start wearing leather tights, I'll throw you off of this building. Speaking of which, why are we up here?"

He shrugged. "My limited research suggests that all superheroes prowl rooftops."

"Watching Netflix doesn't count as research. And I'm no expert on crime, but I don't think much of it happens this high off the ground. Find anything interesting?"

Elijah told her about his lame evening. He ended with the embarrassing story of how long it took him to climb the fire escape.

"You managed to make it up here just fine," he said. "How'd you accomplish that?"

"I asked nicely," she smiled. "There's an access door right over there, and a friendly bartender showed me the way."

"Ah, the old 'asking nicely' trick. I forgot to include that in my superhero arsenal."

Willa shrugged. "I never leave home without it. So, no luck at all?"

"Well, I thought I saw an old woman getting mugged. Turns out the guy was just asking for directions."

"You're a natural at this," she said.

"It would have been more fun if my sidekick were with me."

She raised a brow. "Ah... that's cute. No one told you, did they?"

"Told me what?"

"You're the sidekick, Sparky," she answered with a wry smile.

Elijah laughed and stretched his back. "Well my *partner* in crime was a no show."

"Sorry I'm late. I got kind of...caught up with something. Then it took me forever to find you. Next time leave a more specific note."

"It's fine. And yeah, I didn't want to bring my phone. I had a nightmarish vision of being in court one day to stand trial for all of this. Some sort of location tracking thingy on my phone was Exhibit A. Decided it was safest if I just left it at home."

"I had the same idea. Maybe we can buy some walkie talkies. But you don't have to worry about court. A giant metal monster who terrorizes neighborhoods? They'll definitely shoot you on sight."

"It's details like this you forgot to mention this morning when you were giving your 'let's save the world' speech," he said.

"Are you having second thoughts?" she asked. Willa had this uncanny ability to switch from humor to earnestness without hesitation.

"Yes? No? I don't know. We're definitely going about this all wrong. Is this what Pittsburgh needs? Someone like me? In the movies, evil is always so obvious. But in real life...I may have powers, but I'm far less prepared to deal with your everyday crime than the police are. They might not be perfect, but they've got numbers and equipment and training. All I've got are burning arms."

"And a PhD. Don't forget that."

“True. Maybe next time I’ll bring my best lecture notes.”

“Make the bad guys fall asleep until the boys in blue show up,” she said. “That’s not a bad plan.”

They were both quiet for a second. Some dude puked in the alley while his friends laughed and took photos.

“That’s not all you’ve got,” she finally said. “You’ve got me. And you’re right, maybe the police are better equipped to handle petty crime, but they would have stood zero chance against Brooke. They would have lost more than a few trying to take her down.”

“Yeah, but here’s hoping she was a one-time thing.”

“She’s not though. Not exactly.”

Willa told Elijah why she was late, about how she scared the crap out of a mourner at the cemetery while hunting her nemesis.”

“Wow,” he said. “Takes wrestling with your ghosts to a new level.”

“But Rex is more than a ghost,” she responded. “And he’s still out there. I’m telling you there’s something not right about him, something I doubt the cops can handle. Which means, that as special as you are Dr. Branton, weird things were afoot in Pittsburgh before your arrival.”

“Six months,” he said. “It’s been six months, and we’ve heard and seen nothing out of the ordinary. Let’s say you’re right, let’s say that there are threats of our caliber running around. How will we find them? Not by sitting around on rooftops.”

“No,” she said. “I doubt you’d be able to find them at all. But like I said, you’re not alone.”

He thought about that for a second. “What do you propose? How do we track these hypothetical threats?”

She shrugged. “Same way I found you. *Magic.*”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



Elijah's world was once grounded. A thing of order. Of reason. Of fact.

But now he sat on a rooftop on Pittsburgh, watching a poet weave magic with her words.

"In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith..."

She chanted softly, the words ringing with a gentle cadence as she repeated the poem again and again. And yet, nothing happened.

"Are you sure this will work?" he asked.

"Not if you keep interrupting me," she said. "And no, I'm not sure. Maybe it's the wrong spell, or maybe I'm saying it in the wrong ways. Or maybe there's nothing insidious going down out there. But it's worked before, and it has to beat your method. Now shut up, will ya?"

Elijah smiled as she eased back into her chanting. His friend continually amazed him. Something in Willa, or something in the words she spoke, came alive when she needed them. Watching her, Elijah could see that it was more than following a recipe. She wasn't painting by numbers or barking out orders to the universe. But nevertheless, she recited her verse, and the universe responded.

In spectacular freaking ways.

"My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight—"

Willa gasped, mid line.

"What is it?" Elijah's emotions whirled from curiosity to fear to wonder.

"Something..." She hesitated. Her eyes looked off in the distance.

"There's something out there."

Elijah's skin, normally warm, went cold.

"What is it doing?"

Her eyes snapped back to the present.

"Killing."

They jumped into Elijah's car and barreled north, across the river, following whatever vision Willa's poem had granted her. Elijah felt alive. The hours of boredom faded behind him as he chased after the poet's words.

Something was out there. Something that threatened this city—his city. And Elijah was done standing by.

They passed the stadium and the museums and moved further into the darkness of small neighborhoods—the kind of places where families lived and died, trying to scratch out an honest living in peace. A place that should be quiet on a night like this.

But screams filled the air, and they were anything but natural.

There was a small warehouse with empty lots behind it, and Elijah could hear the pained shouts echoing from the back of the building. They sprinted around the corner.

And then they saw it.

It was like a scene from a B grade horror movie.

There were half a dozen men on the ground. Most of them were groaning and writhing. A few didn't move at all. Blood covered the dark alley.

And standing in the middle of it all, holding the last struggling victim, was a demon come to life, wearing a yellow raincoat. Scales covered its exposed arms. They were pale, with a dull yellow glow in the moonlight. Black eyes blinked back at him—a blood stained mouth curled into a snarl. The creature was small, maybe five feet tall and mostly legs at that, but it held the much larger man off the ground like he was a child.

“Help me,” the man grunted out.

Elijah looked to Willa. Her eyes never left the creature. He knew the time was now. A sick feeling filled his stomach, but as soon as it came, it was then replaced by a rolling fire. He pushed up his sleeves, and his screams soon outmatched those of the dying men.

He looked down as steel pulsed through his veins—but it was tactical error. When he looked up, a scaly foot the size of a dinner plate slammed into his chest, throwing him backward. The ground flew up to meet him, and he landed with a thud.

The impact of the blow like a cannonball found its target.

But that pain was soon replaced by a different one from inside of him as his chest burst into flames.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



The poem leapt to Willa's lips before Elijah started to turn, but she couldn't finish it in time. The creature attacked first. It threw the man to the ground and launched forward, like a pole vaulter without the pole. The thing angled its body like an arrow and knocked Elijah on his ass.

Willa raised her hands, but the creature spun, sweeping her legs from under her. The poet felt the wind leave her as she hit the ground.

Willa rolled over, but the creature had already sprinted away—after its victim, who fled desperately down the alley.

Willa was determined not to let the mysterious beast catch the man.

The words sprang to life in her, and even while panting on the ground she spoke them with conviction. It was the same spell she used while training with Elijah.

Cold wind swept down the alley.

The creature's lithe movements slowed. It lowered its head, trying to make progress against the squall. Willa continued the verse.

The creature bent to the ground, changing tactics. It leapt into the air and gained a height that would have made a professional basketball player blush. It spread its arms and legs wide and caught the wind, using the force of the spell to propel itself back down the alley.

Toward Willa.

Willa's poem stopped but the creature had too much momentum and too much experience. It flipped and forced its legs forward, once again a human missile. Willa held up her hands in a futile gesture.

But the blow never came.

The creature was intercepted by a titan-sized metal hand.

The thing hit the ground hard but somehow managed to find its feet. It crouched low—part frog, part python. Its hiss made the hair on Willa's neck stand up.

"You okay?" she asked Elijah.

He nodded. Metal covered his arms from his elbows down. His shirt was nowhere to be found, and his chest looked like a knight's breastplate *after* being torched by a dragon. The strange symbol

glowed proudly amidst the mess of steel.

He looked at her. A grotesque metal mask spread out from his red eyes. It covered his forehead and his cheeks down to his beard.

He looked totally badass.

“What do we do with this thing?” His voice sounded unnaturally low and rumbled as he spoke.

“I’ve got no freaking idea. But we can’t let it use our city as it’s hunting grounds.”

“Agreed,” he said, then stepped toward the creature.

Willa followed after him—her hands balled into fists and a poem ready on her lips.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



Elijah charged. All fear and doubt gone now that he was covered in steel. There was a murderous monster clear in front of him and broken bodies on the ground.

It was as obvious a sign as he was ever going to get, and he was determined not to waste it.

He raised his fists like two blood moons.

The thing crouched low, paused, and then sprang into action. Feet and claws lashed out at him. Elijah tried to block, but too late—the thing moved with deadly precision. He stumbled backward, the metal on his chest and arms taking the brunt of the attack.

Unfortunately, he was too slow to deal any back.

The one good hit he got on it would have been enough to dent a dumpster, but the thing showed no sign of pain. Either its scales were thicker than they looked, or it was just plain tough as nails.

Willa tried to get in on the action as well. She managed a few good kicks, but the bulk of her attack spells missed or were broken by a swift kick—almost like the creature knew the attacks were coming.

Elijah grunted as a scaly fist landed on his exposed side. The creature followed it up with a claw that slashed at Elijah's throat. He pulled back just in time. The talon drew blood, but not enough to slow him down.

Willa started another poem, as the creature ducked, expecting a spell, Willa changed tactics and lashed out with a knee. The trick worked, and the lizard was caught off guard. Willa's knee connected with the thing's jaw, knocking it back into Elijah's arms.

He grabbed it, a giant hand on each arm, and squeezed. The thing kicked and struggled, but his arms were like a vice, and he refused to yield.

The metal on his arms had cooled while they fought, but now that he had it in his grasp heat raged inside of him again. Steam rose from his skin, and he heard the creature scream.

It was hideous, like if he had found Dory, and she was being sautéed alive. And yet, there was something familiar in it.

Something human.

Elijah hesitated for the first time since seeing the beast. His grip

loosened slightly. It was all the thing needed.

Its head whipped back as if its spine were elastic, and its skull crashed into Elijah's metal face. The pain must have been extraordinary for the creature, but it was enough to do the job.

Dazed, Elijah let go and stumbled.

The reptile didn't hesitate. It sprinted toward him. Elijah raised his hands to block his face, but it was exactly what the creature expected. It jumped and kicked off of his metal hands.

He fell backward as he watched its arc skyward.

The thing must have reached twenty feet before grabbing the side of the warehouse. And like that, it was gone.

Elijah screamed as the metal fell off of him, but his mind ignored the pain. He focused instead on that thing that had just kicked their asses.

Willa checked on a few of the men lying on the ground, then came over to him.

"Are they?" he began to ask but couldn't finish.

"Alive, barely. But we've got to go."

"We can't just leave them," he said as she helped him to his feet. His raw skin prickled like a newly plucked chicken.

"Listen," she said. "Can you hear it?"

He stopped for a second, then the sound became clear. Sirens.

"They'll help these men, but we have to get out of here. Where's your shirt?"

"Torched," he said. She smiled. "Don't even say it."

But she couldn't help herself. "Well at least you kept your pants on this time. Even for a girl like that, I wasn't sure."

His mouth gaped. "That thing was a woman?"

Willa rolled her eyes. "You really don't have much experience with the opposite sex, do you?"

"No, I can honestly say none of the women I've ever been with had scales and claws."

Willa laughed. "Fair point. But it was more the way she moved. Her eyes... it was like they could understand us."

Elijah thought back to the fight for a second. He pictured Willa fooling it with a false spell. "You're right. What the hell was that thing?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. But whatever it is, I think it's human. Or it at least it once was. Now it's just..."

"A killer," Elijah said. He pointed toward one of the downed men who had stopped writhing for good. The cops couldn't help this guy.

Willa stared at the dead body and repeated Elijah's words back to him. "What the hell was that thing?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



Rita took a running jump toward the building outlined by the light of the full moon. Kicking off the bricks, she grabbed a drainage pipe fifteen feet off the ground.

“Shit,” she spat under her breath as pain shot through her arm. The magician and the fiery freak proved to be a match for her. Enough of a match to send her running. Plus, she had heard the piercing whine of sirens. Between her fellow mutant fighters and Pittsburgh’s finest, she knew the game was lost.

So she ran. Her animal instincts were built to keep her alive.

Not that she thought the academics would have killed her. They didn’t have the guts for it. She could tell by their sloppy moves that they were newcomers, amateurs, really. But two super-powered newbies were worse than a slew of thugs. The Foundry had gripped her below the shoulder, and the dark metal arms, seeping with red fluid, burned the hell out of her.

Rita had watched them for months, their training always in her sight. Ever since she watched them stand up to Cold Steel in PPG Place, she had learned all she could about them and their abilities. But now she experienced their power first hand.

She climbed up the drainage pipe and grabbed the edge of the roof. With her right arm she pulled herself up and mantled over the edge, dropping onto the flat tar-covered surface. She could have taken them out. Rita knew it the way a hawk knows it can take down a sparrow. If it came to blows again, Rita wouldn’t hesitate to end them. But that wasn’t the question. The question was, why did she even have to fight them in the first place?

Chem.

Her anger flared at the thought. The mad scientist had sent her to the spot, given her intel on where she could find those two-bit criminals. And lo and behold the bookworms emerged in the exact location.

Maybe her blackmail on him wasn’t as iron clad as she assumed. Or maybe Chem figured they’d kill her on sight. Having his freak sidekicks take her out would be a convenient way to move on with his life—and his experiments. Her death would ensure that his name and

reputation would remain intact.

She knew from the moment she laid eyes on him that he might stab her in the back, but she figured he'd have the guts to be the one holding the knife.

Rita snuck across the roof toward the north end of the building, keeping low in the shadows, as had become her method. She had spent years staying out of sight, and Rita swore she wouldn't get mixed up in anything like this—a situation that might blow her cover—expose her monstrosity to the world. She dropped down onto a pitched roof and scrambled up the angle with ease, the talon-like claws on her feet scraping as she walked. One thing she could say about her new body, it was far superior to the human shell she had lived in for most of her life.

Arriving at the peak of the roof, she crouched by a gable and tried to formulate a plan. Rita considered heading over to Chem's house and ripping his damn throat out. Her thin lips turned up into a devilish smile.

She would enjoy every second of it, but it was the wrong play. As long as the possibility remained that he might be able to help her, she had to champion his survival.

Rita scrambled down the other side of the roof. Getting to the edge, she crouched on her haunches, her butt just inches from the black tar shingles.

What do we have here?

Rita watched as a man ran down the street toward her. He got near, and she could smell his desperation. Since her transformation, her senses had increased exponentially. It had been only a matter of time before she could identify all sorts of things through smell—including human fear. Another few steps, and her eyesight caught up with her nose. It was *him*. The one man who got away from the fight.

Perfect.

She waited patiently.

Just as he passed beneath, Rita launched off of the roof, letting out a shriek that would terrify the bravest of souls in the Steel City. The man hardly had a chance to look up before she landed.

Rita hit him and then the ground with a roll, gaining her feet. She turned, ready for a fight. But this one was already done. The man lay prone, knocked out from the collision or perhaps the impact of his skull on the concrete. She took a second to check his vitals, pleased to find a heartbeat.

Rita grabbed the man and tossed him over her shoulder.

She'd go to see the chemist after all, but she wouldn't go empty-handed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



Chem leaned against the exposed brick wall at the back of the old closed-down diner, tapping his foot and waiting as patiently as humanly possible. He had used the building before, when he needed a place to run particularly sensitive experiments outside of the watchful eyes of his roommate. Whether it was the carelessness of the property owner, or the hope that the place might rent soon, the electricity and water were still functioning, which made it a perfect place for his clandestine research.

On two occasions, he had used it as a mobile medical center of sorts, for his clients who weren't able to return to their homes. He could charge a premium for those services.

Tonight, his intentions for the restaurant were for a different kind of meeting. His new acquaintance had the address. He made certain of that. But she should have been there over an hour ago.

Maybe she'd never show again, and this nightmare was over.

Checking his watch, Chem decided to call it a night. Real work waited for him in the basement of his house, in his *actual* lab, after all. Every second was precious. Blackmail or no blackmail, he refused to waste any more time waiting for the stranger. He turned toward the table and started packing his things when he heard a door creak at the back of the building.

He held his breath and grabbed the oversized Maglite in his work area and patted it in his open palm. He had no idea what he would do with the thing. Even if it *could* serve as an adequate club, he wasn't much of a fighter. But it gave him a hint of comfort to have some sort of makeshift weapon.

Out of the shadows crept Rita, adorned in her yellow raincoat with a man draped motionless over her shoulder. It looked impossible. The body was enormous, but she walked as if he weighed nothing at all. Chem had seen her only hours ago behind the hospital, but he still recoiled as she pulled back the hood, exposing her pale, scaled head. The surface of her body, where he could only assume she once had skin, was disorienting enough. But her eyes filled his insides with worms. Wide-set, but narrow, with eyeballs covered over in a deep black, Chem could hardly tell what damn direction she was looking,

and he guessed that little escaped her vision.

She dropped the man on the floor, his body landing with a stomach-churning thump. "He's alive." Her words came out with a hiss.

Chem inspected the body. "You sure about that? Looks like you did a number on him."

"Speaking of which..." Rita shrugged out of her raincoat, and it dropped to the floor.

Chem saw the wound on her shoulder immediately. "Looks like you got a little too close to the campfire, Nemo."

"More like I got too close to *your* friends," Rita growled. "And I have half a mind to rip out your heart and shove it right up your ass."

Chem knit his brow. "You mean Elijah and Willa?"

"How many freaks do you know?"

"There was this one Tinder date..." Chem let out a low whistle.

Rita took a menacing step forward. "And they were out there. Right where *you* sent me. The fiery bastard did this to me," she said, looking down at the burn. "Try something like that again, and the files will be the least of your worries. I have half a mind to take a pound of flesh right now."

Chem stepped back, raising his hands. "Whoa, whoa, whoa. Wasn't me. Honest. Those damn fools are trying to be superheroes or something. Crime stoppers. Not really my thing. I don't look good in spandex, believe it or not. Sounds like they were just trying to save the world, and you ended up in the way of justice."

"Trying to save some assholes, you mean," Rita replied, pointing at the man on the ground. "Good thing this one got away. Or else I wouldn't have anything for you."

Chem nodded. "Asshole indeed. I patched this guy up a couple months ago. He's a Grade-A shit. Spare no guilt over what you did to him. Or what we're about to do."

The way Rita stared at him, it was clear guilt couldn't have been further from her mind.

"If you're playing me..."

Chem held up both hands in defense and tried to smile. "Believe me, just coincidence. Here, I've got something to help with the burn. Call it a down payment on the full healing we're hoping to achieve."

He reached into his bag and threw her some of the cream he had been perfecting on Elijah.

She grabbed the canister and held it suspiciously away from her.

"Look," he said, "I may not love it, but we're in this together now. I didn't set you up. Honest. I don't know how they found you. And I don't mean to be an ass about this, but it's not like you make a good first impression. I'm surprised you don't get jumped from well-

meaning citizens more often.”

Chem watched Rita. She was thinking, calculating, coming up with her plan. Her black eyes bored holes into this head, but he must have said something that convinced her because she eased back and put the cream in one of her pockets. "Anymore coincidences," she finally said, "and I'm coming after you *and* your friends. You'll like my final impression far less than my first."

Chem found he couldn't swallow. "Deal. Now, let's get to work."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



Rita leaned in over Chem's shoulder, breathing down his neck as he prepared. Judging by the steady rhythm of her breath, he assumed she was happy with what she saw: rows of vials, a few hypodermic needles, and the other gear laid out on a tarp, a barrier between his surgical instruments and the filth of the old restaurant.

Calculations ran through his head.

It's gotta work, he thought. This time.

"You want to give a man a little space to do some science?" he said, glancing over his shoulder at Rita. "Make yourself useful and get him up on the table. I brought some ropes, so you can tie him down. Make sure he won't be able to move in case this doesn't go as planned."

"You mean like the last time?" Rita hissed with disdain. She lifted the man and secured the ropes as she waited for an answer. The man started to stir, but her knots looked like they would hold.

Chem knew exactly what she was talking about. Brooke Alarawn. As much proof as anyone could need that progress had consequences.

"I already told you, that wasn't my fault," he said, his scientific pride getting the best of him. "She stole the serum, and six months ago it was barely even a prototype, definitely not something I would have tested on a living subject—present company included. But I haven't been sitting idly on my ass. And this little energy drink just might finally be on course." He waved a vial at her before drawing its contents into a syringe.

"What about the man with the metal arms?" Rita asked. "Was *he* your fault?"

"Dr. Inferno? Hell no. He's the catalyst for all the shit that went down then, not me. But it's because of him that this might work at all. Whatever bug he picked up in the old Alarawn mill, it gave him more than power. It gave him the strength to support that power, including the ability to repair itself rapidly after that power rips through him. His blood mixed with my science, with the right tweaks, should give us the strength and healing factor without all the fire and brimstone. Believe it or not, Brooke was a step in the right direction. And I've made a thousand and one steps since then."

"So it will work?" She asked. Her voice sounding hopeful for the

first time. "It can cure me?"

Chem paused, not wanting to piss her off. "Theoretically, it can cure almost anything, including whatever the hell happened to you. But that's just the theory. You know, if you could tell me a little more about your...condition, it could help. Science likes data."

She ignored his question. "Just make it work."

He sighed. "What do you think we're doing here, Ariel? It's too risky trying this on...whatever the hell you are. We can't do it, not until we know how it will react to normal human DNA. Truthfully, I'm nowhere close to human trials. We should keep using it on the mice. Or we could try a smallmouth bass, if you prefer. But that'll take time."

She slammed her hand on the table, and he could feel the floor shake. She was damn strong. The man on the table started awake, confused by where he was. Rita shoved a grime-covered rag into his mouth just before he had a chance to scream.

"I've waited long enough," she said through her teeth.

Chem took a breath, wondering what those teeth could do to him. It was an experiment he had no desire to test.

"Which is why you've brought me Violent Perp Number One here. He's our new lab rat."

At the word lab rat, it suddenly dawned on their captive just what was going on. His eyes grew wide, pleading with them. Rita's face transformed as she looked down at the thug she had dragged in. It was the most human she'd ever looked. Lines drew around her eyes—lines Chem had never seen. Something was there. Empathy? Humanity? He needed to keep the beast in to accomplish what came next. Like it or not, human trials were the quickest way to help Vida, and Rita solved the problem plaguing Chem for weeks—how to find willing subjects.

Or at least available subjects.

"The cold-blooded monster turning soft on me?" he asked. "Didn't peg you as a bleeding heart. This guy is one evil bastard. Rape, extortion, murder. He's seen it all. Won't do an ounce of bad if Pittsburgh saw the last of him. But we don't have to do this, you know. There are other—"

Whatever options Chem was going to offer, he never got the chance. Rita's faced changed in an instant—drained of emotion. Her hand moved in a blur as she snatched the drug out of his hand, and before he could protest she plunged the needle into the criminal's arm, hitting her target with perfect precision.

As soon she pushed the plunger, the man's eyes shot open. His face turned bright red, and a single vein stood out on his forehead as if a blue earthworm crawled beneath his skin.

Rita glanced at Chem and then back at the subject.

Before their eyes, the man started to change. First, color came back to his face. Then the scrapes, bruises, and road rash from his altercation with Rita vanished before their eyes, like a time-lapse video played out in reverse. His body even seemed to grow, as if he was putting on new muscle. His wild eyes became focused and piercing.

"Is it..." Rita started to say.

Chem nodded, not taking his eyes off the man. Unwilling to reach for his journal, he made mental notes about the process. Every detail was catalogued. In the back of his mind, he wished that he had been video recording the whole thing. They were on the edge of something monumental. Chem knew this for certain. "Yeah. Hell yeah. It's working."

Chem's pulse quickened, and he could feel beads of sweat on the back of his neck. All that he had worked for, all that he hoped in, was manifesting before his eyes. He had finally found a cure.

But before he could pat himself on the back, the man bolted up, shredding his constraints.

"Oh, shit," Chem yelled.

The man was off the table before Chem could move. A monstrous right hook jack hammered Chem in the side of his face. It rattled his teeth and knocked him clear across the room.

He cursed as he hit the ground and spun ready for whatever kind of defense he might be able to muster, but there was no need.

The thug, now all souped up on the serum that Chem had created, had Rita by the neck, like a pipe in a vise. Her webbed feet kicked uselessly three feet off the floor. Chem watched her face twist in pain and desperation. She was a goner, and Chem knew it.

As Patient One held her aloft, a thin layer of ice developed over his hand, which traced its way down, finally covering his entire body. Chem had flashbacks to the night at PPG Place. A chill ran up his spine, not from the cold emanating from the man, but because he realized he had created a monster.

Again.

Rita slashed over and over with her claws at the man's arm. But he was totally unresponsive.

His grip only grew tighter, spurred on by her attacks. And then, she did what seemed impossible. With a snap of her torso, Rita flipped her body over onto the top of the man's arm. She wrapped one leg around his bicep, hooking his shoulder with her foot. Her body made one quick convulsion, like a diver snapping out of a full-pike position. The sound of breaking ice and snapping bone echoed through the empty garage. And the man let loose a godless shriek, dropping Rita to the floor.

In a heartbeat, she was on her feet again and prepared to take full advantage of the criminal's surprise and physical anguish. She was on him, all four limbs wrapped around him like a toddler on his mother. Only this toddler was out for blood. Chem watched as claws and teeth, fists and feet went to work on the man. Ice shattered. Blood sprayed in every direction, and Chem nearly felt badly for the man he'd just moments ago been willing to sacrifice for the greater good. For science. For Vida.

During his time on the streets, and his time with Willa and Elijah, Chem had seen plenty of violence. But nothing compared to this. It was a slasher film turned up to eleven, but all taking place in real life. Before his mind could even make sense of what was playing out before his eyes, the man was on the floor, pools of blood pouring out from countless lacerations. But as quickly as the blood was spilt, the thick red liquid froze solid, just like the rest of the man.

"What the fuck?" was all Chem could muster.

Rita turned to him. "I don't think it worked."

He pushed on the man's torso, finding it solid as a rock. "Or it worked *too* damned well," Chem replied. "I guess test one is in the books." His eyes darted at the body. "We'll try test two tomorrow. If you're up for finding another volunteer."

Rita just stared at him with her black beady eyes. Her stare was unnerving. "Whatever it takes."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



“Shit, that stings.”

“Sorry,” Willa said, but she didn’t ease off. The bandage looked sloppy across Elijah’s neck and shoulder, but she tied it tight and hoped that would be enough. Morning light started to filter into the small kitchen, but they still hadn’t finished patching each other up.

She surveyed her work, satisfied that his wounds were at least clean. Chem could take a look at it later—whenever he returned. The first thing they had done when they got back to the small house in Homestead was knock on their makeshift doctor’s door, but no one answered. Considering the late hour, Willa should have been worried. But seeing as it was Chem, it raised no concern. He had always been a little unpredictable.

She sat down and put the bag of frozen peas back on her neck. Her head drummed from where she had hit the ground. She didn’t think she had a concussion, but she was no expert. Again, she wondered where Chem had run off to.

Elijah finished applying his burn cream to his raw arms, then slid a large shirt on and plopped himself on to the kitchen chair. He looked slightly dazed. But he must have caught her worried stare because he smiled.

“I imagined playing doctor with you would be more enjoyable.”

“Screw you,” she laughed. “Emergency medicine wasn’t exactly something they covered in my MFA program.”

“Yeah. Once I read a treatise written by a civil war doctor on best practices in amputation. But I don’t think that applies here. At least your leg didn’t look gangrene. Maybe we try leeches.”

Willa subconsciously reached down and felt the bruise that had taken over her calf. Her ankle hurt to walk on. “She sure knew how to land a kick.”

“Ah, so we’re back to that,” Elijah said. “You still think it was a woman?”

“No doubt in my mind,” Willa answered.

“A *human* woman?” Elijah asked.

“Well, obviously not *human* human. But she definitely knew what was going on. There was intelligence to her movements, intention,

even amidst the savagery. An elegance maybe.”

He thought for a second. “I think you’re right. It was hard to think of her that way while she clobbered me. The way she looked, smelled. All I could see was a damn horror show. But in retrospect there was something more than the monster in there. And...I kind of hate to say this...I think she went easy on us.”

Willa nodded. “I felt the same way. There were several times when it felt like she pulled her punches. The way she tore into those men—the way she anticipated our moves. She could have killed us had she wanted to.”

“But why didn’t she? Or more importantly, what the hell is she? I’m new to Pittsburgh, but I’ve never seen that in the Monongahela. I thought alligators in the sewers was more of a New York legend.”

“The river,” Willa said. “That’s what she smelt like. I’ve been trying to put my finger on it.”

“It was more than the smell,” he said. “She glistened. But I had help figuring it out.” He rifled through a stack of papers and pulled out a week-old tabloid. The historian had been collecting them ever since he became a frequent topic.

There on the cover, in a poorly drawn caricature, was the being they fought: **The Creature that Crawled out of the Monongahela.**

Willa rolled it over in her mind. It made sense. “A river monster that knows how to fight, and has a taste for blood. Freaking spectacular.”

Elijah laughed again. “You were the one who wanted to go after something more in our wheelhouse. Well, I think The Creature qualifies as the big leagues.”

“Nice sports reference,” a voice in the doorway said. “Didn’t think you had it in you.”

They both turned with a start as Chem walked in. Willa couldn’t be sure, but she thought he was wearing the same clothes he had on the yesterday.

His bloodshot eyes avoided hers. “Please tell me you got those injuries playing pickup basketball with the neighbors and not by doing something that I warned you not to do.”

“Trust me,” Willa said. “The folks we ran into tonight were not the casual recreation types.”

“Pickpockets? Car thieves? Or did you get lucky and nab a purse snatcher.”

She threw the tabloid at him. “Try this horror show. She’s real, terrifying, and hunting.”

Chem sighed, then shook his head. “Let me get my medical bag. I’d better patch you up properly while you tell me of our newest neighbor.”

Chem grunted in response to Elijah's story while he replaced Willa's shoddy bandages. He sounded surprised as Elijah described The Creature—but in Willa's mind, there was something off about his reactions. A little forced, like a kid trying to fake himself out of trouble. Or maybe he was just focused on his work. Willa wasn't sure.

"So what do you think?" she asked after Elijah finished the play by play. "Can you shed any light on what that thing was?"

Chem shrugged, then moved to check on Willa. He started wrapping her ankle. "Exotic wildlife's not really my forte. Maybe next time, while you're getting your ass handed to you, you could collect a blood sample for me."

"I don't know," Elijah said. "She was freaking fast. It would have been nice to have some backup."

Chem shook his head. "Already told you, man. We, the three of us, we're academics. Researchers. Running around on rooftops is the last thing we should be doing. I can't stop your dumbass cosplay routine, but I for one prefer to stay in at night."

"But not last night," Willa said. "Where were you?"

She winced as he pressed the bruise on her leg. "How do you know I didn't have a hot date? I've got a life outside of you two, believe it or not. Haven't lost my swagger...yet."

His tone made it seem like he'd prefer the conversation to end there. Again, Willa had the sense that he was hiding something from them. Certainly not the first time Chem had given off that vibe.

She started to ask him another question, but he rose to his feet. "All right, you both will live, although I think you got extremely fucking lucky. My professional opinion is that you apply some ice, take a nap, and quit it with this hero shit. Or next time there might not be enough of you left to patch up."

"Weren't you listening?" Elijah said. "There's something out there. And deny it all you like, but we're more than what it says on our diplomas."

"We can't just let it go, Percy," Willa added. "And you shouldn't either. It killed a man tonight."

"Boo freaking hoo," Chem said. "Those guys were running around in numbers past midnight. I was listening. Odds are they were up to no good and deserved whatever they got. Maybe you don't know everything, Willa. And maybe if you started minding your own business, you wouldn't be bleeding in my kitchen."

Before she could respond he left for the basement. Willa almost followed but decided to let it go. Chem could be an ass, but he was still their friend. If he didn't want to talk, she wouldn't force it. At

least not yet.

“Maybe he’s right,” Elijah said. “Maybe we’re not ready for this.”

Willa wrapped her hands around her coffee cup, hoping to find it still hot. “We’re probably not. But as far as I can tell, there’s no one else. What if that thing starts hunting around here? Or by the university? What if there’s a whole race of them just waiting to invade the city? Percy’s wrong about one thing. It’s not just someone else’s problem.” She thought about Edwin and Brooke and Sean. “Ignoring stuff like this doesn’t make it go away. And until someone else steps up, we are all this city’s got. Just because we don’t know what to do, it doesn’t excuse us.”

Elijah nodded. “I know. That thing’s not going to stop. I could see it in her eyes. And I’d be lying if I said there wasn’t a part of me that wanted to take another crack at The Creature. We did okay tonight, despite the bruises. Actually, we did more than okay. We probably saved some lives. It’s not our lack of skill that worries me; it’s our lack of knowledge. We’re flying blind here, and that thing isn’t. Chem’s the scientist, not us. And without some sort of insight into what it is we’re fighting, it will always have the upper hand.”

Willa thought for a second. Edwin’s picture laid where she left it on the kitchen table. And surrounding him, the *Vox Populi*. She had never known her grandfather to have friends—not true friends anyway. But next to him, stood a man with a wide smile. His hand rested on Edwin’s shoulder—a touch of intimacy that was rare for the old magician.

“Maybe we aren’t alone in this,” she finally said. “You’re right, we need more info. But Percy isn’t the only one who knows about strange things in the city.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



Willa's quads burned as she took the steps two at a time. Many homes in Pittsburgh sat high above the street level, and this was no exception. It gave the city strong legs.

She had left Elijah behind to rest and went back to Edwin's office. It had taken an hour of searching through his desk, plus several phone calls to different departments around the campus before an aging administrative assistant finally gave her what she needed—a name.

Now, standing on the porch, her heart rate increased. The poet-magician had no idea what she would find, but she knew this was her only next step. They needed answers, and her grandfather was no longer alive to offer her guidance.

But his friends were. At least one of them.

She knocked, then waited as the sound of shuffling feet greeted her. The door opened warily, but kind eyes looked out at her.

"Yes?" the old man asked.

"Dr. Crane? My name is Willa Weil. We need to talk."

Dr. Mallory Crane's living room seemed to press in on her, a cramped space not well arranged for entertaining. Low ceilings and dim lighting added to her claustrophobia, and Willa made certain to keep her eye on an exit.

The aging professor sat in an orange upholstered chair sagging from decades of use. A picture of a kind-faced woman with sparkling eyes rested on a side table next to him, alongside a teacup and a hardback novel.

"Yes, Edwin and I were friends." He paused. "No, that's not a strong enough word. Your grandfather was something more. He was like a brother. Though I was older in years, he was more mature in experience and dedication." The man stared at an invisible dot across the room. Willa let him dwell in the memory. After an eternity, he continued. "I could hardly believe it when I heard of his death. The man seemed immortal. On the other hand, part of me always assumed his fate would have caught him earlier."

Willa leaned into the space dividing her from her grandfather's friend. "What do you mean, Dr. Crane?"

"Well, your grandfather had a knack for sniffing out trouble. It's probably what made us so successful." He paused, a smile added to his heavily wrinkled face. "But of course, that's what you're here to discuss, isn't it? Our...extracurricular activities?"

Willa nodded but remained silent. She feared spooking the old man when she was so close to an answer.

"Yes, right. The *Vox Populi*. I'm embarrassed at how pretentious that sounds. We were small at first, and Edwin had recruited most of us. He never revealed how he knew where to look, but he could see the potential in us—our powers. I'll never forget the day he talked with me after class." He paused, lost in thought for a moment. "*Intro to Russian Lit*, I think it was. To call him forceful would exaggerate it only a little."

Crane blew across the lip of his cup and sipped. "I mean, I was terribly confused as my own abilities developed. I was a poet, like him. Like you. My words started to affect the world, and no one could explain to me why or how. Frankly, I thought I was going mad. That's when Edwin got a hold of me."

"How many of you were there?" Willa asked.

"Hmmm, let's see..." The man stared at the ceiling as if counting. "In the beginning there were eight of us. We were young—stupid, really. But we had energy and, I guess you could say, courage. It started almost as a hobby, saving helpless damsels and confronting petty crimes. I had pictured myself as one of those characters in the pulp fiction books—a guilty pleasure of mine that I hid from my colleagues."

Willa leaned back in her chair and crossed a leg. While the story was captivating, it was nothing she hadn't heard from her grandfather. She pictured the men, young and heroic, running through back alleys by night and teaching by day. "What happened?"

"There are only two such ways any venture like this can end. Death or retirement. We suffered some heavy losses in those years, but nothing disrupts a friendship quite like children. Once your father came along, Edwin called it quits. Without him, the *Vox Populi*...well I guess you could say we lost our voice. We disbanded and retreated to a mundane life. And we let our heroism fade into myth. After your mother died, Edwin came out of retirement, but I'm sure you know all about that."

Willa nodded. The last conversation she ever had with her grandfather was about how he spurned the canon and descended into madness and murder—until the Guild showed up.

"If I have any regret from my long years, it's that I didn't help him

then. Sometimes, I think that I could have prevented Edwin from falling into evil. From running afoul of the Guild, but he was nothing if not determined. And we each must follow our own path.”

He took a sip of his tea, then looked at Willa intently. “But listen to me, rambling on. If you are here, then I am sure history is not on your mind. What do you really want, Willa? Are you in some sort of trouble?”

Willa hesitated for a second. Something warned her about divulging secrets to a man she had just met, but she had already come this far.

“There’s trouble, but it’s not me I’m worried about. Not really.”

He laughed. “Let me guess. The city is in need.”

She bowed her head. “Something like that.”

“You are so much like him. Placing the world’s woes upon your own shoulders.”

Willa smiled. It’s like she didn’t know the real Edwin at all.

“Well, come on then,” he said. “Tell me about the grave threat that only *you* can stop.”

She told him everything, about the death of Edwin and her search for Rex. He nodded along, like she was a student talking through struggles writing a term paper, but he didn’t truly get excited until she turned to discuss The Creature.

“Well, I’m sorry to say that I’ve never faced an animal like this before. It sounds truly horrifying.” He took a sip of his tea, seeming anything but horrified.

“So you don’t know anything that can help us?”

“I didn’t say that, child.” A mischievous smile crept across his lips as his mind wandered again.

She kept quiet, willing him to speak.

Finally, she couldn’t stand the silence. “Well?”

“As I said before, there was plenty of crime in this city that the authorities had no will or power to deal with. So your grandfather took it up himself. And there was one man, a villain so to speak who we crossed paths with many times. He had everything north of the Allegheny River in his hands—in fact, he practically ruled the North Side. Based on your story, I’d concur with your scientist friend. The victims of this creature sound like the exact kinds of men he’d employ. If something underhanded is happening in that neighborhood, then I’d wager my house he is somehow involved. And keep in mind, I’m no gambling man.”

“Tell me his name,” Willa said.

The old man hesitated. “I’m not sure if it’s the wisest course.”

“Please,” she said.

“You have to understand, Edwin was my oldest friend. I shudder to

think what he'd do if he knew I was sending his beloved granddaughter straight into the lion's mouth. This criminal is no laughing matter."

"My grandfather is dead, Dr. Crane. And all I have left is what he taught me. I can't sit back and let my grandfather's city be torn apart. And even though he turned from the path, I have to believe he would be proud of me—even if he wouldn't approve."

Crane stared at her unblinkingly. Something passed behind his eyes, some emotion that Willa couldn't name.

"His name is Anthony Rizzo. He's a man of ill will and evil intent. And if something foul has touched Pittsburgh, then he has his fingers on it. But mark my words, the man is practically bullet proof. If you go after him, you *cannot* hold back. That was a lesson your grandfather taught me."

Willa smiled. "Don't worry, I know how to throw a punch. And I have someone stronger than bullets on my side."

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



With the new smoking laws in effect, only a handful of bars within Pittsburgh's city limits still let you enjoy a smoke with your shot and beer. Tim Ford was pretty sure he had found them all. Each one had its own kind of throwback charm, but he found his favorite in Kathy's. A dark dive on the North Side with a killer jukebox and cheap beer that made the veteran feel like he had found a home away from home. Not the kind of place to take a date, but exactly the kind Ford was looking for.

The job hunt had not gone well.

Finishing his third draft, Ford read the Pittsburgh daily newspaper for the fourth time. Drinking cold beer on a hot evening and scanning the help wanted ads—he was leaning into the cliché that his life had become, and it felt like shit.

Worse and worse the more he drank.

"Need another?" The kid behind the bar asked.

"Yeah." Tim said without taking his eyes off the paper. His answer felt as hollow as the rest of him. Drinking outside of the neighborhood allowed him to drop the pretenses. No one in this place knew him, meaning there wasn't anyone that needed convincing that he was doing just fine. The anonymity brought him some comfort at least.

Except for a few depressed faces down the other end of the bar staring into their drinks, the bar was empty. They only glanced up every now and again at cable news on mute. Tim had never thought that he'd be joining the likes of them.

"Here you go. I guess you're looking for work," the kid said sliding the beer across the bar.

"Mm, hm." If Tim wanted conversation, he would have gone to a social club or a therapist or just about any place but here. He hoped that the bartender would get the hint and leave him the hell alone.

"You'd probably be better off looking at Craigslist or the City Connect app. Not much in the paper anymore. And you can use them on your phone while you sit here getting a little shit faced." The kid smiled and tossed his towel over his shoulder.

Tim looked up and gave half a grin. He knew that the guy was just trying to be helpful, friendly even. Hard to blame him for trying.

Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out the same flip phone he had used since before he went overseas and waved it in the air. "Can I get them on this?"

The bartender laughed uncomfortably and scratched his beard. "So, you're one of the holdouts."

"I have what they call an old soul. Smart enough to not need a smartphone."

"To each his own." The bartender grabbed Tim's empty glass and dropped it into the dishwasher behind the bar. "What are you looking for?"

"A paycheck."

"There's plenty of jobs like that," he replied. "But I doubt it's going to do much for you. You look like a smart guy. Strong. I'm sure you can get something more than just a paycheck."

"Sure." Tim looked back down at the paper but could still feel the kid's presence.

"In fact, the career counselor at the University helped me to make sense of it all in our last meeting. Said that I should chart out all the things that I'm passionate about and see where they overlap with all of the needs that are out there, and then try to figure out what I'm good at." He took his finger and drew three imaginary overlapping circles on the bar. He jabbed his finger at the place where they coincided. "There. That right there is the job that you should be looking for."

Tim could sense someone approaching from behind him, but before he could turn, the man spoke, his voice was a husky baritone. "Hey, kid. Why don't you stop playing Oprah for a second and go get me a shot of Gentleman Jack. Neat. And a clean glass, if you can find one"

The man dragged the stool next to Tim out. It screeched over the sound of old country music coming over the ancient speakers. "This one taken?"

Ford turned slowly and stared into the steely, cold eyes of a familiar face.

Anthony Rizzo.

For a man in his early sixties, Rizzo was built like someone thirty years younger. With a broad chest, deep set eyes, and a thick patch of gray hair on the top of his head, everything seemed perfect on this man, except for the angry scar taking up half of his face.

Ford's stomach turned over. Most long-time Pittsburghers knew Rizzo and knew him well. Even though he appeared on the books as a legitimate business man, anyone who'd been in the city for more than a few years had heard the rumors about his real business ventures—none of which were aboveboard. If Anthony Rizzo showed up in a

dirty dive bar asking for a seat, you gave him the fucking seat.

Glancing over Rizzo's shoulder, Ford eyed three guys standing behind him. The same three he beat the hell out of on the sidewalk outside of Voodoo only the night before. Cuts and bruises covered their faces, and it was a wonder the one guy could even stand. Suddenly, Tim realized that he had made a terrible mistake. He imagined that trying to explain the situation to Rizzo would be as hopeless as trying to empty the Three Rivers with a broken shot glass.

Rizzo stood tall, kept his eyes on Tim but spoke to his men. "This the guy?"

The biggest of the three started to answer, but Ford, resigned to his fate, cut him off. "Yeah. I'm the guy."

Rizzo smiled, which made the scar on his face curl like a snake. "You did all that with your bare hands, did you?"

"Yes, sir." Ford had no idea why he added the *sir* for this Pittsburgh mob scumbag, except for the fact that old habits die hard. And right now, he had an habitual need to jump off his stool and kick their asses all over again. Rizzo's very presence was a threat, and Tim could feel the familiar rush of adrenaline through his veins in response. His body wanted violence. Needed it. And after a day of being told he didn't have the right skills for the job, it would feel damn good to use the skills he did have. But he clenched his teeth—forced the sound of gunfire from his mind.

Rizzo whistled. "Impressive. I'm not gonna say they're my best, but these guys aren't wet behind the ears either. I've been thinking I should reward you. Some of my men have been needing a little discipline. Especially big ugly, here." He jacked his thumb toward the biggest of the bunch.

"That right?" Ford asked. "Seems like you could've taken care of that yourself. Or do you always outsource your dirty work?"

Rizzo eyed his thug up and down. "My discipline only goes so far with this one. You know, a father's love and all that shit. And his mother would make me pay for it. That's for damn sure."

"*Fuck*," Tim mumbled into his beer, suddenly realizing that he unleashed havoc on the child of the city's most notorious criminal. His eyes cut toward the door. He wondered if he could break through and make it out to the street before his kneecaps were obliterated, or worse.

Rizzo raised his hands, palms out. "Don't worry. I'm grateful, really. Never was one for religion, but the Bible says some damn good things. Words to live by, more often than not. What was that one?" He stared up at the ceiling as if he were leafing through an imaginary version of the Scriptures. "Spare the rod, spoil the child. I can only imagine you were the rod in this case."

Rizzo laughed at his own line, but the boys behind him didn't crack a smile. Their faces were pure piss and vinegar, and Ford knew they wanted another shot. A very sober and violent shot. Everything in him wished that the old man would step aside and let the pups give it a try.

Turning, Rizzo faked a jab toward his son's face. "From the damage you've done I can see you have skills. Military?"

"Marines."

"And?" Rizzo let the question hang. The man was smart. He didn't get to where he was without having a few synapses firing. He knew that Ford had other experience.

"Blackbow."

"Ah...Blackbow..." Rizzo crooned. "I've run into your kind before. Meanest sons of bitches I've ever known or *hired*, for that matter. I guess that means you're more talented than I even presumed. Well, that's good."

Tim took a slow drink of his beer, not dropping his eyes from Rizzo's. "Sure. It paid the bills. I saw the world. Mostly just acted as an overpaid body man for rich assholes."

"Sure you did." Motioning toward a set of booths on the opposite end of the bar, Rizzo said to his men, "Go have a seat, fellahs. Grab a drink. Let me talk to Mr. Ford alone for a minute."

The knot in Tim's gut returned. The boss knew his name. What else did he know?

"May I?" Rizzo nodded again toward the empty stool next to Ford.

"It's a free country."

"Tell that to the politicians." Rizzo removed his blazer and hung it over the back of the stool, taking a second to smooth the fine fabric. As the bartender paced toward the other end of the bar to find the best bottle, Rizzo nodded toward him. "I heard what he was spouting off to you just then. Damn snowflakes. If my father heard that guy talking about gifts and needs and desires when it came to finding a damn job, he'd wring the kid's neck. What's this world coming to?"

Ford gave Rizzo half a grin out of courtesy. "You're telling me. I just need to get back on my feet."

"Let me guess, no jobs for the veteran huh? We send you over there to do our dirty work, can't even look you in the eyes when you return."

Ford sat quiet for a second. "Something like that."

Rizzo thanked the barkeep with a warm smile as he passed Rizzo a generous pour. The gesture surprised Tim. The guy could be a real asshole, and now his sudden gesture of kindness took Tim off guard.

"But your career counselor here, he's not all wrong," Rizzo said as the barkeep walked away.

“What’s that?”

Rizzo laughed a full belly laugh. “As much as I hate to admit it, half that bullshit he’s talking about is true. I mean, I’ve never met a guy who loved his work and was doing half an ounce of good who went home and kicked the dog or yelled at his kids. Work, meaningful work is the cornerstone of a damn good life. Maybe the snowflake’s got something going for him. Then again, he’s slinging piss beer here in this shitty bar, so probably not the career coach you’re looking for.”

Tim looked back down at the paper, hoping that Rizzo might just go away. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“You should do that. Do that while I’m keeping you in mind. What you did to my boys,” Rizzo whistled again, “I know who you are. You’ve been built to be a soldier, to tear things apart. It’s in your bones. Deep in the marrow. Something you can’t change. You’re machinery of destruction. Hell, my boy’s face is proof of that. I bet you crave it. I bet you’re already picturing what your hands would look like with my blood on them. Trust me, that’s not the kind of work you can find in the want ads.”

Ford held Rizzo eyes, and the world stopped around them. Everything in him wanted to deny the thugs words, but, deep down, he knew Anthony Rizzo was right.

Rizzo broke the silence between them, “I bet you’ll never get to feel right again until you get back into the field. My guess, you’ll be reenlisting within the year. But what if I could offer you something a little closer to home. Work that’s right up your alley, so to speak.”

Ford turned back to the paper. No way he was getting involved with a gangster like Rizzo. He’d worked for monsters before, he wouldn’t do it again, no matter how small his bank roll was.

“Don’t need your help.”

Rizzo nodded and knocked his knuckles on the paper, folded out on the bar. “You’re not going to find salvation in here. It’s not your path friend. A simple life will tear you apart. I know guys like you, and I’m not much different than you. I’ve seen it happen a million times.”

It was as if Rizzo looked into Tim Ford’s soul and read every line. Every hope.

“I’m nothing like you, Rizzo. I might be a killer, but I’m not a criminal. I joined the service to protect my country from monsters, to protect my city. I didn’t come back here to turn a profit at its expense.”

Rizzo stood like a statue staring Ford down. An evil calculus moving through his head, and Ford wondered if he had crossed a line. Maybe this conversation would end in bloodshed after all.

“Please. Criminal is such an ugly word. I like to think myself as an

institution. Hell, without the Rizzo's this city would crumble. And as a part of this city, I know full well that not all of our enemies live overseas. There are monsters *here* as well."

Rizzo pulled out a rolled up tabloid and laid it overtop of Ford's paper. A crude drawing of a sea monster stared up at him.

"Aren't you a little old to be afraid of the Boogie Man?" Ford asked.

"The only reason I lived this long is by giving due respect *and* fear to what deserves it. And trust me son, The Creature deserves both."

Ford said nothing as he stared at the picture. He wanted to laugh it off, but he couldn't. Not after what he saw the other night.

"Ah," Rizzo said. "So you've been back long enough to experience Pittsburgh's monster problem first hand. What did you see?"

"The Foundry."

"That fool, he's nothing compared to The Creature. Sure, he makes for a good headline, but this thing right here," he tapped his fingers hard against the magazine, "this thing attacked a dozen of my men last night. Killed half, put the other half in the hospital. We still haven't found the body of another."

"Yeah, and what exactly were your men doing out in force last night? Singing carols?"

Rizzo laughed again. It was disconcerting. "My men aren't saints, but they're human. We might break the law from time to time, but we still play by certain rules. Society like ours can't stand without boundaries. But these things... These monsters... they break all the laws of God and men. The Creature might just be hitting my drug runners and muscle now. Fair enough. Nobody gives a shit about that but me. But six months ago, they butchered the entire board of a proud Pittsburgh company, including Brooke Alarawn herself. How long do you think it will be until they start attacking any of us—all of us? How long until they start creeping around your neighborhood?"

Ford couldn't help but picture Bobby.

"What are you suggesting?"

Rizzo smiled again and slapped him on the back before swallowing his drink. Dropping his glass on the table with a bang, he slapped a hundred-dollar bill next to it. "The Creature is a stone-cold killer. It will take a stone-cold killer to catch her."

"Catch her?"

"Oh yes. This is a new war, Ford. And we're going to need new intel. We need to know exactly what the hell she is and where she came from. It's the only way to keep the city safe. So what will it be soldier? Will you help me?"

Ford downed his drink then turned back to Rizzo.

"Yes, sir."

PART TWO



I have looked upon those brilliant creatures, And now my heart is sore.

*All's changed since I, hearing at twilight, The first time on this shore,
The bell-beat of their wings above my head, Trod with a lighter tread.*

Unwearied still, lover by lover, They paddle in the cold,

*Companionable streams or climb the air; Their hearts have not grown
old; Passion or conquest, wander where they will, Attend upon them still.*

from "The Wild Swans at Coole," W. B. Yeats

CHAPTER THIRTY



Elijah looked at himself in the mirror. Pink skin around his eyes stood out against his pale face, like he had a reverse sunburn. A fresh bandage stuck to his shoulder. The wound from the creature's claws still throbbed when he moved, and he had no doubt it would break back open as soon as he exerted himself. Heroism exacted a price.

And if Willa's new lead held any truth in it, Elijah would be paying that price tonight all over again.

His arms were a little less embarrassing than they were six months ago. And all the exercise had done wonders on his stomach. Or maybe it was the magic in his veins. Either way, while he'd never be mistaken for an underwear model, the pudgy faculty member had seen some transformation beyond the whole raging steel monster bit.

But the scar branded on his chest stood out more than anything. Curved lines ending in sharp points intersected a diamond. He had done a little research on the symbol. It was the sign of an ancient god—a blacksmith who forged weapons in a great fire and used those weapons to defend his people. Elijah had to admit that the symbol was an apt metaphor for what he had become. But instead of a god or a blacksmith, Elijah was the weapon *and* the forge. And tonight, he would see just how hot his fires could burn. He would test what kind of defender of the people he could be.

Chem knocked on the door, then entered without waiting for a response.

"So, you're really going through with this, aren't you?" Chem asked.

Elijah nodded. "It's either this or preparing lecture notes."

"I thought lecturing was your strong suit. That and wearing tweed."

He knew Chem was joking around, but Elijah wasn't in the mood.

"I'm not the man you met last winter, Chem. I have to try to help."

The tall, lanky man leaned against the wall. Elijah could feel his eyes on his back.

"No, no you're not," Chem said. "But the history prof is still in there, and he's the one making this decision, not your imaginary friend, Gabrijel. Your powers aren't forcing you to do this. Hell, if I

could do what you can, I still wouldn't go out there. And yet, here you are, psyching yourself up for another suicide mission. The steel's not in charge. Hell, maybe the steel just revealed something in you that was lying dormant all along. Maybe the old you was more heroic than you're giving yourself credit for."

Chem wasn't known for his kind words. But Elijah could tell his friend meant it.

"Thanks."

Putting down his notebook and pen, Chem said, "Yeah, well, it's the truth. And it's also true that you should just stay in tonight. Metal skin or no, it makes no damn sense messing with stuff you don't have to. With great power comes fuck-all in the way of responsibility, I don't care what the comics say. I know you're taking Brooke's death hard, man, but—"

"It's more than that, and you know it." Elijah rubbed his beard and exhaled. He could feel his temperature rising. "You might not have my power or Willa's, but I also know you're not the coward you're making yourself out to be. I know you, Chem, better than you think. You might not run toward danger, but you're not one to run away from it either. Why are you so opposed to this? What aren't you telling me?"

Chem stared back at him, and Elijah could see that the question hit the mark. Chem had been acting weird, cagey even. Elijah trusted him, but for the first time since they moved in together, he had the sense that Chem couldn't trust him back.

"It's..." Chem paused, and for a second, Elijah believed his friend would finally open up. But then Willa's voice interrupted the moment.

"Everything all right?" she asked as she entered the room.

"Tiptop," Chem said. "Just realizing that I need to mix up more of that burn treatment before I shove off. Something tells me he's gonna need it."

"You're not going to be around?" Willa asked. "Another hot date?"

"Something like that," Chem mumbled as he turned to leave.

Willa gave Elijah a questioning look.

"I don't know," he answered her gaze. "I just don't know."

Willa nodded. She always seemed to understand how Elijah felt. "Don't worry about that now. Percy has been dancing to his own beat long before he met us. He'll come around. And you need to keep your head on straight. We're heading into the lion's den."

Elijah sighed. "Can't wait."

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



"Slow down," Rita hissed. Her sides froze from the hunks of frozen meat lodged under her armpits.

"You slow down. I'm the one walking backward," Chem said, looking up the dark basement stairway toward her. "I swear this assicle is three times heavier frozen than he was thawed. But everything about science tells me that can't be true. Within an approximate value."

Chem and Rita carried the third subject down to the basement of the abandoned restaurant. Her level of aggravation had only grown as she watched the scientist perform failed test after failed test on the criminals she continuously delivered to him. At least they'd gotten good at putting the subjects down after the serum ran its course. Each time, Chem's brew gave the bastards superpowers. She still wanted to rip out Chem's liver, and if he didn't get results soon, she might just take his spleen too.

"Maybe you don't know as much about science as you think you do," Rita grumbled. "I mean, we're not any closer. Are we?"

Chem slipped on the stair, and he drove his shin into the edge of a tread. He cursed the heavens. "Will you just shut the hell up until we get this guy into cold storage? You can do your weepy shit once we turn this corner."

He glanced over his shoulder at the sharp turn at the bottom of the stairs. They had gotten better at it. Chem would drop his end low, and Rita would hold the torso high, helping them angle the frozen corpse around the turn, like a couple of college kids moving an old, beat-up couch into the top of their dorm.

"Steady," he said.

"You know I have the heavy lifting," Rita grunted as she pushed the body towards the slanted ceiling overhead.

"Yeah... And you know I'm still merely mortal, flesh and blood...like a real human?"

"And... like a real dick."

They managed to get the man to the basement and into the giant walk-in cooler. They stood him up next the other three, all of them standing, like a row of macabre toy soldiers lined up on a Christmas

morning. Each of them was frozen solid in different states of abuse from Rita's claws and jagged teeth. The first was in the worst shape. He took them by surprise, lunging off the table at them. But each time after that, they were prepared. The serum would heal the test patient's wounds, but it wouldn't stop there. Within seconds, Rita would be fighting a frozen zombie, while Chem struggled to inject it with his not-quite patented super sedative. It knocked the subjects cold, until the freeze took over, finishing the job.

Chem bent at the waist placing his hands on his knees and panting like he'd just won a marathon. Rita's breathing was slow, and her pulse beat as normal.

"You can't do this," she said. "You can't save them, which means you can't save me. And that makes you worth nothing."

"Well, at least my mama still loves me."

"It's not time for your jokes, Doctor." She stepped toward him, and she knew that he was scared. She could smell it.

Chem stood upright with raised hands. "It's working."

Rita pointed her index finger and its long claw at the frozen figures. "Tell *them* that."

Chem shrugged. "I tried to while running my tests on the first stiff, but these guys aren't much for conversation. They're kinda giving me the cold shoulder." He grinned, hoping he could get her to laugh, even if he had determined that her mutation had taken away the possibility of laughter.

"We're finished," she replied

Rita turned to leave and Chem reached out, grabbing her shoulder. She spun, claws posed for attack. Chem stood his ground. "Listen to me. They are getting better." His voice cracked and lacked any semblance of humor. "*Really*. There's progress. You have to believe me."

"That's the problem, Chem. I've *never* believed it. You've given me no reason to believe you. You're stalling. You have no idea what you're doing, no idea how to heal me... or *her*. Now you're just trying to buy time so I don't expose you." She spat as she talked, and Chem took it on the face.

"Look at me, Rita." But she wouldn't. Her eyes were locked on the stairway leading out of the basement. "Look at me, dammit." His voice was raised, his temperature rising to meet it. Finally, she turned toward him.

Rita saw a face she recognized—that of a man trapped. Rita had spent years, chained to these scales and claws and her little black beady eyes. She sought Chem out because he had the skills and the proper lack of moral principle that she needed. She felt no guilt over forcing him to help her. But she now saw that she had read him

wrong. He had a moral compass, but it bent unwaveringly toward a hospital room halfway across the city. His mistake with the woman had placed him chains too.

For the first time, Rita felt an ounce of sympathy for him.

"I know they're getting better," he said. She watched him walk over and raise the pant leg of their latest subject. He pointed out a tiny hole in the man's calf, big enough to slide a dime into. "It's, well, I guess, it's like a core sample. I'm able to take a piece of his flesh and..." Chem paused, trying to find the words. "I can test each of them and see how the serum is affecting their blood and flesh. This last one, I guess the best way I can explain it is that the ratio of the healing power of the serum and the change catalyst of Elijah's blood is starting to tilt. I just have to keep on pushing it. Find the right combination. It's how science works—each failure gets us closer to success."

"And what if we never get there?" she asked. She couldn't hide the trepidation in her voice.

"We will," he said. "Trust me."

She looked from Chem's face down to the frozen man. Chem was right. He did look more human than the others—barely. Hell, he looked more human than her.

"Look," Chem said. "It's still early, and I'm feeling optimistic. Why don't we try for another? I can head back to my lab, run some tests, prepare another batch and then meet you back here. What do you say?"

Rita stared Chem in the face, searching for answers. But if he was lying, she couldn't see it. Maybe he really could fix her.

"Okay."

Chem nodded. "Great. Remember, stick to the Northside. Exactly where I told you. That's where you find trouble."

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



The Boggs mansion sat in the heart of Pittsburgh's North Side. Just over a hundred years ago, Russell Boggs made his fortune in upscale department stores, the railroad, and banking. He had his fingers in many baskets. Not unlike the mansion's current occupant, Anthony Rizzo.

The North Side, and most of its surrounding neighborhoods, had been ravaged by the steel industry's desertion, leaving them rife for the kind of crime Rizzo peddled. However, recent decades saw a movement to gentrify these parts of the city, and old places, like the Boggs mansion, suddenly became desirable real estate again.

The mansion briefly served as a bed and breakfast, but Anthony Rizzo considered this an offense to the city's once-great past. So, he bought the building for himself and set up shop.

After her visit to Professor Crane, Willa spent hours researching the family. She tried to understand everything she could about the man who ruled this part of the city.

It was knowledge that begged to be used, but Elijah seemed less than interested.

"If things go sideways in there," he said, "it's my metal and your poems that are gonna save us, not your research. For once, I don't see how history helps us at all."

"I'm shocked," she said, and she meant it. "You're really not the old Professor Branton at all, are you?"

"Let's hope not," he said, "or we're screwed. Are you ready for this? Technically we haven't broken the law yet. Just some low-grade stalking. Probably nothing that would cost me my job."

She nodded. "Don't worry. A little breaking and entering rap will give you some intrigue. And the need for cheap part-time labor will always keep you in the classroom." She nudged him in the ribs. "Besides, it will make the students think you're some kind of badass."

"And here I thought my weird face burns would do that for me."

She laughed, the sound muffled under the turtle-neck turned mask that she wore. "Are *you* sure you want to do this? You don't have to on my account."

She could see him shaking his head, despite the large hood he

wore. “No way I’m about to let my dance partner go in there alone. If you die, it will just be me and Chem, and no offense to the chemist, but he doesn’t hold a candle to you when it comes to sparring.”

She gave a mock bow. “Well, I’m honored by your praise, no matter how inconsequential. Let’s see how my sparring translates to the real world.”

The wrought iron fence creaked as she pushed the gate toward the house. Sticking to the shadows, they skirted around to the side entrance. Climbing the steps two at a time, Willa paused at the top of a small porch. She breathed deeply, her eyes closed. She had no idea what kind of security this place contained.

Willa tried the door. Locked.

“Want me to try?” Elijah whispered from the shadows.

She shook her head. “I say we keep you cool for as long as possible. Dripping metal doesn’t exactly look inconspicuous. And besides, you’re not the only one who’s been training.”

Keeping her hand on the knob, she started to chant with confidence.

“Let me glide noiselessly forth;

With the key of softness unlock the locks—with a whisper,

Set open the doors O soul.”

The lock clicked open, and she turned the knob. She could feel Elijah’s smile behind her as they entered.

More of a museum than a residence, the Boggs mansion’s austere furnishing stood out against its opulent fixtures. Willa waited in the foyer and listened. Silence. They gave themselves a self-guided tour of the first floor. Sliding her hand across the mile-long dining room table, Willa made her way toward the kitchen. Its spotless chrome appliances looked brand new. Ill-gotten gains had given the man enough luxury to go around.

When no one jumped out at them, they decided to move on. Willa climbed the steps toward the second floor first, careful of the sound her shoes made as they weighed down each ancient board. The stillness of the mansion threatened to ruin the element of surprise. She adjusted her turtleneck.

All the doors on the second floor lay open except for one, and Willa had a hunch that was the door they needed to open to find the prize. Pausing outside of Rizzo’s room, Willa quickly catalogued the tools at her disposal. For the past three months, committing poetry to memory consumed her every moment. Her preparation was about to be tested. Elijah came up alongside of her then nodded.

“Let’s hope your friend put us on the right path,” he whispered.

She nodded. “It’s time to do what we were made for.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



A small fire crackled in the corner of Rizzo's bedroom, but otherwise the chamber was dark. Elijah held his breath, imagining masked men or even maybe the reptile woman waiting for him in the shadows, ready to pounce at any moment. It was the scene of a monster flick, and he was the idiot wandering freely into the creature's lair.

As his eyes adjusted, he surveyed the room from under his hood, searching for any hint of their prey. Best case scenario, he'd be a sleepy old man, and they could get their answers without much of a fuss.

Worst case scenario ended with Willa and him tied to weights on the bottom of the river. He prayed for option one.

Willa moved ahead of him, whispering something. Her presence brought him comfort. Days and nights of studying her craft made her a formidable foe, even for a slew of mobsters. Her resolution gave her nerves of their own kind of steel.

She stepped forward, then froze moments before a bright light clicked on.

Elijah couldn't help but turn his eyes toward the door. And when he looked, the barrel of a gun stared back at him.

"I had a feeling some of *your* kind would show up around here sooner or later. But I was expecting a frumpy old man, not a fine little piece of ass like yourself."

Elijah moved to advance, but Willa held up a hand. Rizzo's gun didn't waiver. Elijah eased back, trusting her lead.

Willa could handle scum like Rizzo.

"Maybe you're not as well informed as you think," she said.

He laughed. Rizzo was built like a brick wall, despite his age. His thick hair was slicked back like he had just come from the barber. If it wasn't for the strange scar on his face, he could have doubled as a silver-fox model. "Maybe not, darling, but I'm no idiot. It's not the first time freaks like you tried to muscle in on my turf. Of course, back in the day, it was only more mumblers like yourself. The last one I ran into nearly did me in—fucker gave me this." He pointed to the scar. "It's not something I'd soon forget, Princess. But your friend here, now he's something new."

Rizzo took a step forward, eyeing Elijah. “But you don’t quite fit the description, do you? The way my men told it, I was expecting a killer mermaid, not Professor Plum. Where the hell is your slippery friend with the scales and the fangs that has been giving my boys nightmares?”

Elijah looked at Willa, and she gave him a nod. They were both kind of ad-libbing here, but at least their first gamble proved accurate. Rizzo *did* know about The Creature.

“Whatever she is, that thing is no friend of ours,” Elijah said, trying his hand at diplomacy. “And we’re not here for you—just information. Why don’t you put your piece away so we can have a chat? Maybe we can come to some sort of mutually beneficial arrangement. All we want to know is what that thing is, and how we can stop it.”

Rizzo’s gun lowered a little. Elijah could see that he was mulling it over. “The enemy of my enemy, huh? It’s a tempting offer. But no, I don’t think I’m ready to make my bed with your kind just yet. My own weapons work well enough. And besides, I don’t think I believe you. Another one of my men was taken tonight—I just got the word— and now you freaks show up. You’re probably working with that fish bitch. You *and* the doctor.”

“The doctor?”

“Oh yes, I know all about your pal, Chem.”

At the sound of Chem’s name, Elijah turned cold. But Willa kept her composure.

Rizzo barked out a laugh. “You thought I wouldn’t keep tabs on what goes on in my city? I’ve known about your doctor friend for a while—hell I’ve been happy for my men to use his services, but it seems like the real bill has finally come due. I might not have the education you two have, but I’m smart enough to see a pattern. I’d consider it a pretty fucking big coincidence that all of my men who have gone missing were once back alley patients of your friend’s. If he’s not working with the lizard, then I’ll eat my boot. But the smart money says that you all are in this together. And I’ll be damned if I let freaks like your take my city from me.”

As he spoke, his anger grew, and Elijah could see how it was going to end. He tensed, waiting for the shot to come, but it never did.

Because Willa was ready as well.

*“In every cry of every man,
In every infant’s cry of fear,
In every voice, in every ban,
The mind-forged manacles I hear.”*

Rizzo choked as his eyes began to bulge. The gun in his hand shook; he was unable to pull the trigger. Elijah had heard this spell

before. It held Rex at bay for a time, but seemed to be squeezing the life out of Rizzo.

Elijah stepped forward while Willa kept reciting. She nodded, but never broke eye contact with the man.

Let's give it try, he thought.

"All right, shitbag," Elijah said as he stepped forward and ripped the gun from Rizzo's hand. "You strike me as the kind of guy who's been interrogated before, so I'm sure you know the routine. My friend here, the one you've been insulting all night, is playing the role of bad cop. Which makes me the good cop. So answer my questions, or I'll have to start playing worse cop—and that's a side of me you don't want to see."

The man stood frozen, his face turning a light shade of purple. Elijah shuddered to think of what Willa was doing to him.

She stopped speaking, and he fell out of his chair coughing and holding his throat.

"Talk, now," Elijah said. "What do you know about The Creature? Why is it going after your men?"

Rizzo stopped hacking and started laughing. Elijah looked back at Willa. Doubt filled her face.

"You fucking idiot," Rizzo spat. "I'm going to have fun doing a number on you."

Willa started chanting again, but before she finished, the door burst open. Men poured in—men with guns.

"Shit," Elijah cried.

"Fry the fuckers," Rizzo shouted.

Gunfire filled the room as Elijah dove behind a desk the size of the Titanic. A sharp pain tugged at his arm, but he could barely focus on it. Splintered wood rained down around him.

All he could hear over the guns was the sound of Willa's voice.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR



The moment Rizzo laughed, Willa knew things were out of her control. Before the men crossed the threshold, she began a new spell.

*"I shot an arrow into the air,
It fell to earth, I knew not where..."*

She watched as Elijah cleared the desk, but she had to trust that her friend could handle himself. With her arms raised in front of her, she saw two of the men point hard steel in her direction and pull the trigger. She fought the urge to dive out of the way and instead kept her arms forward.

A shower of bullets froze in midair then fell to the ground. The men stopped shooting and stared in awe at her.

"Shooting blanks, boys?" Willa sneered.

The smell of burnt flesh filled the air. It was her turn to smile.

"Now!" she shouted.

A roar shook the room as Elijah rose, steel dripping from his face, arms, and chest. His powerful arms thrust the desk toward them, as if it were weightless. It bowled two of the men over and pinned the third to the wall.

Rizzo was screaming, trying to get his men back into the action, but Willa had already pushed him from her mind. Escape was her only priority.

She ran to Elijah's side. The heat emanated off of him, warming her skin.

"Find us an exit," she said.

He nodded then turned to the window. "How about I make one?" With a loud crunch, he quickly transformed it into a door.

"I'm going to kill all of you freaks," Rizzo screamed as they jumped into the night air. "My man is already out there hunting, and he's going to end every last one of you."

A poem was already on Willa's lips, ready to break their fall.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE



The cracked, dry dirt testified to the fact that an early dry spell had hit Pittsburgh. The ground was thirsty, and so was Rita's skin. Generally, she'd spend as much time as she could in the waters of the three rivers, even if they were warmer than she preferred. Going back out for a second test subject didn't help, but tonight, a mercy fell from the sky in the form of rain. Steam rose from the hot asphalt, enough to make halos around the street lamps lighting the North Side.

Not far off from where Rita waited, two new athletic complexes had sprung up, turning this portion of Pittsburgh into an upper-middle-class wonderland. Real estate prices skyrocketed as cool bars with outside terraces opened around what was now being called the North Shore. Rebranding always follows the money. But enough property remained on the North Side for Rizzo and his men, making it prime hunting ground for The Creature.

Chem had worked some of these streets more often than Rita had, patching up Rizzo's dealers and runners when they needed it. It's also where he sent her to harvest their test subjects. There were still plenty left for the laboratory table and the pinch of Chem's needles.

She crouched in the shadows, running her webbed hands along the surface of a puddle that formed on the concrete at her feet. Scooping it up, she poured it over her head. The dirty water provided sweet relief. The night had been long already, longer than she had hoped. The chemist, until now, had never erred on where to find a thug for the laboratory. But she was starting to wonder this time. According to Chem, her mark ran his life more precisely than a German train conductor.

Just when she considered abandoning the mission, the door of the safe house opened. Light seeped out onto the stoop, and he emerged. "Well, hello," Rita hissed to herself. She wasn't the only monster on the block.

Big Lou, the most aptly named gangster in history stepped out onto the stoop. In cheap, loose fitting jeans and a shirt that showed off his fast-food build, Rita could see that Chem had her climbing down the ladder for this one. But beggars couldn't be choosers. Lou looked right and then left before stepping out onto the broken concrete. Hitting his

key fob with his thumb, lights flashed on a late-model, dark sedan. The car's quick chirps broke the relative silence of the city soundscape.

She watched him survey the streets before getting in. He was careful. The careless rarely lasted long in his profession.

Rita prepared to spring, but drunken laughter stayed her hand. Two late night revelers walked down the sidewalk, leaning into each other for support. Dismayed but undeterred, Rita watched as her target got into his car.

The Creature was careful too.

The engine roared, and the car edged out onto the street, which was barely wide enough to accommodate one vehicle, let alone another trying to come the opposite direction. The North Side was infamous for its confines, and this man was no newcomer to this part of town.

Patience was a virtue. She would be as virtuous as an old monk tonight. The car left without signaling, and she knew it was her shot. Jumping out of the shadows, Rita ran with all she had. The yellow raincoat flapped behind her in the wind. Six months ago, she never would have traveled this way. Fear of exposure gripped her days, and travel above ground and out of the water was always more conspicuous. But desperate times called for hauling ass out in the open, and the times they were certainly desperate.

She nearly caught the car, when it came to a red light. Rita slowed, but only a little. For a moment, she considered dragging Big Lou out of the sedan right there. But his car idled at one of the only busy intersections in the neighborhood. Better to wait. Still, she needed to be smart. Once he turned, he would have a long stretch without stop signs or lights.

Rita cut left trying to get a jump on him. Water splashed all around as she sprinted down the alleyway. Her skin laughed at every cool splash that landed on her scaly hide. She glanced up, a line of cars were waiting patiently at the intersection and blocking her passage. No room on either side.

Within a yard of the tail car she leapt. Her right foot slammed the trunk, and she ran over the roof and jumped to the next and the next. Clearing two more, she finally got to a box truck blocking the path. With both legs, she pushed off the final car and grabbed the top rail of the truck as it rumbled out of the alley and onto the main thoroughfare.

One benefit of her condition was never having to pay for a ride.

She pulled herself up onto the slick roof and dropped on her belly. Rita let the truck do the work as her heart rate slowed. Peering over the edge, she kept careful watch on the turns and the road signs

labelling the intersections. Finally, the truck hit a red light, and she knew it was time for her exit.

Rita jumped off the truck, hit the ground, and rolled. Without needing to think twice she was on her feet and running for the place where her hunter's instinct drove her.

She watched Big Lou exit his car and walk down the alley. She used his trunk as a step and launched herself skyward.

He turned in time to see her yellow coat flapping in the wind.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX



Big Lou absorbed the brunt of the trauma as they hit the ground. She heard a crunch and a grunt as their bodies met the asphalt. Letting her body go limp, she gripped his shirt so as not to roll off of him. The man cursed, something so vile that she wanted to kill him right then and there. But instead, she gripped his neck with her left and jacked two controlled right blows to the side of his head.

She had to be careful. Her strength was beyond human capacity. Rita had learned that, without regulation, she could end a soul without even trying. The man spit blood and looked back up at her into her dark, empty eyes.

“What the fuck are you?”

“Shut your filthy mouth,” she whispered as she squeezed. Rita glanced around, making sure there was no one else coming. No one else in the car. She sniffed the air—nothing but the stale french fries haunting this man’s breath and a strong whiff of skunk nearby. Unusual this deep in the city, but not unheard of.

She looked back down at the now unconscious body and released her grip.

Her path from here was more or less straightforward. Find the nearest sewer entrance that could accommodate Lou’s girth, then work her way back to the diner that doubled as Chem’s lab away from home. With any luck, this man would be on ice before dawn.

With more effort than her previous marks required, Rita lifted him onto her shoulder. She turned and stared into the barrel of a pistol.

“Drop him or you’re finished.”

A mountain of a man with shaggy blond hair, a tight black t-shirt, and black military cargo pants stood like a wall in front of her, his aim unwavering. She smelled the air again on instinct, and once again caught nothing but the smell of skunk.

A hunter.

Rita felt sudden sympathy for the unconscious body on her shoulder.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” she lied. “Put your gun down. Walk away.”

The man started to lower his gun. Relief settled over Rita.

“No,” the man replied. He raised the gun again and fired.

Rita flinched, but lucky for her the hunter was a shit shot. He missed, wide right. The lead shattered the back window of her mark's fancy car. But even a blind squirrel finds a nut every now and then. Maybe the next one would find her.

With a fluid motion, she hurled Big Lou at the hunter and ran. There were more evil men out there, and she'd find another subject for Chem easily enough. But getting killed tonight wasn't on her to-do list. Rita knew her route instinctually.

Toward the water. She could smell it. Feel it.

Trusting that the man who missed a stationary target from ten yards off would prove himself consistent, she darted for the alleyway that led toward the river. Feet slapping the wet asphalt her legs churned like the pistons of a well-oiled machine. She stole a glance over her shoulder and saw the man in pursuit. He was one of Rizzo's. Had to be. No good Samaritan would chase a monster like her.

And judging by the fact that he had masked his scent, he had been lying in wait.

She cut to the left, ran a block and then took another alley. The water drew closer. She glanced back again, and he was still there. Maybe even gaining. When she looked forward, her gut twisted.

Dead-end.

As the tall brick wall approached she scanned a way to climb.

But there was nothing.

Almost nothing.

A window, fifteen or sixteen feet high, covered over with security bars, was her only possibility. If she could reach it...

She didn't let up, in fact, her pace quickened. She jumped at the wall, kicking her foot hard on the bricks, she pushed her body skyward. Her right arm extended for the bars. For her escape.

The tips of her sharp claws scratched the metal but didn't make any purchase. Rita's body plummeted to the ground beneath.

She hit hard, and pain welled up through her knees. Now she had no other choice. She had to bring this son of a bitch in. Jumping to her feet, she turned, claws exposed. His gun was trained on her.

“You better kill me with that. Or you're not walking out of here.”

“If I wanted to kill you, I wouldn't have missed back there. I never miss.”

Without lowering his gun, he raised his hand and found a black cord that Rita had missed, hanging in the darkness. The man smiled, then pulled.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN



Tim had taken down rebels in South America, terror-cell members in the Middle East, and a few unseemly characters in Jersey, but none of them held a candle to the creature standing before him in the dim light of the alley.

A deep skill set, ingenuity, and luck had come together as the mighty triumvirate more than once to save Tim Ford's ass. A soldier doesn't make it through years of service in the thickest of dangers without them. Looking at the thing, he realized that all three would need to align if he were going to deliver the package to Rizzo. So far, so good.

He had led her right where he wanted her.

Reaching up, Ford grabbed the dangling cord. With a quick jerk, the quick-release knot let loose and a swooshing sound filled the air as the weighted net dropped from overhead. Tim had planned it perfectly, and The Creature had done its part as well.

The thing shrieked as the giant webbing covered it like a web in one of his old Spiderman comics.

Before it could find an opening, Tim pulled on the rope, cinching down the bottom around the monster. This mission, like so many others, could have become a shitstorm—and fast. Ford thanked whoever might be watching over his situation and prepared to meet The Creature.

It struggled against the thick cords of the net as he approached. In the dim light, Ford could see the bright yellow cloak over the thing twist and turn as The Creature thrashed, desperately trying for escape. When it heard—or sensed—Tim standing over it, the thing stopped and knelt on the asphalt. It cowered in his shadow, suddenly transformed from a dangerous beast into a trapped animal.

The thing turned its head in his direction, and the sight of it took him by surprise. From all the Rizzo had said, and the speculation that had overtaken the city, Tim expected something thoroughly monstrous. The images of the creature in his head were more beast than man. Something from an old dime-store novel or a late-night, B-grade movie.

A snack-sized Godzilla would have been easy for the soldier to

dispense of, at least according to his conscience, but this thing was something different. It stared at him with unblinking, beady eyes. The yellowish skin was scaled like a lizard or maybe some sort of fish, but nevertheless, he couldn't help but feel the presence of another person staring back at him.

Over the years, you learn to judge friend from foe on the battlefield. The soldier's instinct was a vital component for both survival and victory. But at that moment, instinct failed him.

"What are you?" he asked.

It answered, but not in the way Ford expected. With an animalistic shriek and two quick swipes of its dagger-like claws, the animal shredded Tim's military-grade net.

Before he could react, it jackhammered a right fist into his rib cage with more force than he could ever expect from a creature so diminutive.

The element of surprise could ensure the first strike, but not necessarily the second. Tim grabbed the thing by the yellow cloak and pulled it in close, while simultaneously swinging his forehead into the spot where its nose should've been. Regardless of how the thing's face was structured, his headbutt brought with it the sound of crushing cartilage and another shriek, this one of pain.

The Creature didn't relent. Swinging both arms up through the center of Ford's arms, it broke his grip on her cloak and then landed a quick left jab before rolling out of Ford's reach to safety.

He rubbed his jaw, which stung just a bit more than his pride. But he knew how to take a punch and exactly how much his pride was worth in the heat of a fight. "So, The Creature not only can talk, but it can put on a show, is that right?" He stared at it. The thing was crouched in a three-point stance like a lineman ready to rush.

"Survival of the fittest, dickhead," it responded. "Now I'm going to let loose years of evolution on your sorry ass. And when I'm done with you, I'll just move on to the next piece of scum. And then the next."

It launched. He sidestepped, and it flew past him just barely grazing his thick back with its right set of claws.

Tim winced as his back screamed in pain, then quickly pushed the pain out of his mind. He could attend to that later. The job taught him to block it out. Turning, he found the monster on its feet again with a wicked snarl on its smooth face.

"Let's see what you got," it said. Instead of jumping, it advanced more slowly, and the two of them started circled like a couple of junior high boys on the playground. Tim kept his line of sight moving between its eyes and hips. A lifetime of battle taught him to do so. The eyes can lie, the hips will always show an attackers true direction. He had to assume that this was the case for man or beast.

Finally, it made its move, a quick attack with its claws. It wasn't going for a power strike, but a laceration. A creature like this relied more on gutting its prey than knocking it down and out.

It moved fast, but Ford moved faster. A quick turn of his arm and he caught its forearm in mid-flight.

He gripped the cold leathery flesh for all he was worth, and almost by habit, he twisted the arm around and up behind the beast.

"You're on the hook now," he spat in its ear.

The thing jerked, and its wet, slippery arm escaped his grasp. "Like hell I am," it spat as it dropped and swiped his legs out from underneath him.

Ford hit the ground. Before he could respond, she was on him, forearm across his throat, knees pinning his arms to the wet asphalt. This time it didn't slash, but instead, cracked him in the face over and over again with its bony knuckles. It watched him closely, as if examining a specimen. Ford could smell its breath, stricken with decay. He shifted his weight, trying to get an arm free. The strikes came, again and again. Stars swam before his eyes. He'd made a life out of taking a punch—and the occasional bullet—but the force behind this creature's blows were like nothing he'd ever experienced.

In a last-ditch effort, Ford swung a knee up toward its back, while also torqueing his right shoulder. The beast pushed down harder on his throat as it bucked forward. It still had the advantage, but the move freed his arm for a split second.

A split second was all Ford ever needed. He reached what he needed.

The animal screamed as he plunged his Blackbow knife into its meaty thigh. It squeezed down harder on his windpipe, and Ford knew it was now or never. He shoved the blade in up to its hilt and twisted. Arching up away from him, pain twisted on the monster's face. It gave Ford a moment to land a quick right to its head, knocking the thing clear off of him.

He spun up to his feet, just in time to watch The Creature sprint toward the main street. A rock landed in his gut as he saw it vault ten feet off of a dumpster to grab the rails of a fire escape and scramble off into the night. Before he could even curse the thing, it was gone.

And so was his knife.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT



Shocks of pain swept up Rita's body each time she put weight on her left leg. She gripped the laceration to try to slow the steady flow of blood leaking from her body. Her other hand squeezed the thug's knife, still slick with her cold blood.

Rita had been in plenty of brawls since she had changed from her human form. Some of them were defensive, fighting back against street punks who insisted on giving the "freak" a hard time. But other fights she instigated, and each one of them had it coming. She had never met her match, until her fight with the magician and the molten man—and now this. He was different than the others. A specialist. Trained. And his skills were sharpened on real battlegrounds, not the city's war streets.

Creeping through the city, she had considered doubling back on her own path or even dropping into the sewer system. Staying out of sight was always a priority, but right now, with her precious blood seeping from the knife wound, Rita needed to get patched up fast, or she might not live to see the sunrise. There was only one person that she trusted, even moderately, to do the job.

Checking the diner, she found it empty. She must have taken too long. Chem had clearly given up on her. Turning toward the river, she headed for the only other place he could be.

Easing through the basement window, she could already hear him grumbling. "Where the hell were you? I wasted hours. Precious hours."

She groaned and he looked up at her.

"Don't even try to—" He stopped and looked her up and down. Chem's face changed. It softened. "Aw, damn." He nodded across the room. "Let's get you up on this table. You look like hell."

Without any more questions, he rushed over to her side and threw her free arm around his shoulders. He limped her over to the workbench and laid her down, gently cradling Rita's head until it touched the metal surface. She looked up at him. Her eyes softened by his simple act of humanity. Easing her arm out of the yellow raincoat, Chem exposed the wound so that he could inspect it. After sanitizing his hands, he pushed around at the laceration, trying to see beneath her pale, scaled skin.

"One of Rizzo's men get the best of you?"

She shook her head, face tight with pain. "I... I don't think so. At least not one of his regulars. This guy was different." Even as she talked, Chem rushed around the room laying out supplies from his medical bag. It was always ready for a quick call from some gangbanger in trouble. "He was tracking me. Prepared for a fight. He's good. *Really* good."

"Better than you?" Chem paused and looked up for a beat.

Rita was silent for a moment, again contemplating the question. "Look at me?" she said. The blood seeping from her body was answer enough.

Chem gave her a quick nod in response but then fell into silence. He set about tending to her wound. She expected Chem to treat her like he did his test patients. Detached. Scientific. Objective. But that wasn't the case. He checked in with her on her pain levels and tried to make sure she was as comfortable as possible.

"Why are you doing this?" she asked. "It'd be better for you if I just died."

Chem laughed. "I'd like to say that didn't cross my mind when you first walked in here. Don't tell anybody I said this, but I might just be starting to like you. It would be a shame to lose you right before I finish the serum. I mean, you *are* my final test case."

"Shithead," she hissed.

"Yeah. I've gotten that one before." He looked up and smiled. "Maybe I'm just afraid you have one of those secret spy-release software systems that will send all my documents out to the world if you don't check in every eight minutes, or some shit like that. Either way, you're my patient now, and I'm not letting you die."

"Thanks," she whispered.

"Well, I am a man of principles. *Very* few principles, but the ones I do have, they mean something to me." He looked up into her beady, black eyes. "I mean, we are partners, right?"

Her face wrinkled in response and Chem laughed.

She watched as he inspected the spot he had just cleaned and pulled out a needle and thread. "I'm all out of local anesthetics, but I imagine you can take little pain. Why don't you tell me a story while I finish you up? That's supposed to help."

Rita exhaled and clenched her fists, ready for the hurt. When she was fully human, she hated needles. Any kind of needle. She had never even pierced her ears. That self was a long way off now, but a residue remained, and she'd rather face another knife wielding soldier than deal with the little prick or tugging of the thread.

She was quiet for a moment as he readied to work. Whether it was the blood loss, or the tender way his hands moved, something came

over Rita.

For the first time since she had turned, she began to tell her story.

"I wasn't always like this, but I guess you know that. It all changed when I moved here, to Pittsburgh."

"Shit," he said. "Remind me not to tell this story to the tourism board. I can just see the billboards now. 'Come to Pittsburgh, grow webbed feet.'"

She ignored him. "Truthfully, I would have come anyway. I would have gone anywhere with him."

"Ah," Chem said. "Now this is a story I've heard before."

"Pittsburgh wasn't my first choice. It wasn't my hundredth choice. This city is nothing like my home. But my fiancé found work, and I was going to start an art program at one of the universities. Life couldn't have been better—even in Pittsburgh."

"Sounds like a damn fairytale," Chem said. His fingers moved deftly, and he kept his eyes on his work.

"Almost. We had our days, just like anybody else. But I was happy."

Chem pressed the point of the needle against her scales and pushed. Rita clenched her teeth, but compared to the wound the warrior had left behind, the pain was nothing.

She knew it was a doctor's trick, textbook bedside manner, but Chem tried to keep her talking. "So, what killed the fairytale?"

Rita scanned his face, trying to tell if he could be trusted. Caution be damned, she continued, "I did. Look at me. You want to wait for this hideous beast to walk down the aisle in your direction?"

Chem shrugged. "I guess it would take a serious set of beer goggles."

Rita let out something that sounded like a laugh.

Chem went on. "I mean, there was my uncle Eddie. I think he married a distant cousin of yours." He whistled. "No offense, but that chick would scare the hell out of Jabba the Hutt. The family took it all right. Eddie never won any beauty contests himself, if you know what I mean."

"You know I'd punch you if I could, right?" Rita asked with a hint of humor in her own voice. Not letting him answer, she said, "We had an accident. I guess that's the part you want to hear about."

"I've seen a lot of accidents, treated some patients back in my med school rotations. None of them looked like this."

"No shit. Mine had what you would call *complications*. We were coming back from some party one of his asshole friends was throwing up in the North Hills. It was dark that night. He'd been drinking so I drove. Your city and its damn weather. Rain covered the windshield faster than the blades could wipe it away. You know the story. A

truck, like one of those tankers that carry gas, cut me off, clipped the front of my car. We both spun out of control, through the guardrail, and down into a ravine. Pretty cut and dry.

"Except for the fact that we landed in water. Some runoff ditch or something. Likely it was bone dry most of the year, but with the rains, it had swollen. Thankfully, my fiancé was able to get out. But the crash jammed me up behind the wheel, and I couldn't budge. He pulled and pulled, trying to get me out. But it was no use. Before we knew it, the water filled up the car to my chest and then continue to rise little by little."

"I've got a feeling this one doesn't end with a happily ever after," Chem said still working the needle and thread.

Rita winced as he pulled a length through her skin, making another neat little suture. "Not even close. I still remember the strength of his arms wrapped around my body. Pulling. Screaming. Crying. I knew it was over. We both did, I think." She paused lost in the image that she explained to this near stranger. It struck her how easy it was to talk about it. "And then, as the water got higher, he took my face in his hands. They seemed so giant. He stared at me for second, and then he told me he was going to get help. Told me not be afraid. He said that he was always with me. That's when he kissed me for the last time."

Chem paused his work and took a moment to look at her. An emotion she wasn't used to see filled his eyes. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

Rita looked at him. His face changed again. Pity filled his eyes, and she almost resented him for it. Almost.

"You're a good man, you know that? Better than you let on. Not just skilled. Good." The words came out almost unintentionally; she knew he needed to hear them.

He shook his head. "I ain't been good since I could walk, Rita. Don't go getting sentimental on me." He looked back to her wound. "Did he come back for you?"

Rita shrugged. "I have no idea. I tell myself he did. We were in love, after all. Days later, I woke up in the woods, curled up in the fetal position. Everything ached. When I first looked down at my body, I thought that the problem was with my eyes. That I wasn't seeing right. It didn't take long to realize that the problem was with the rest of me. My eyes were just fine."

"Well, damn. That makes my really shitty day seem not so bad." He went back to his work.

"Glad I could help with your perspective problem."

"What was that truck carrying?"

Rita shrugged. "I don't know. By the time I worked my way back to

the ravine, there was no trace of it. I spent years hunting down some clues, and I've found nothing. But something it was hauling, or something draining into that ravine, or some combination did this to me. Changed me."

"It kept you alive," Chem said.

"If you can call this living."

"There are worse alternatives," he said, then fell quiet. Rita knew what he was thinking. He was thinking of a woman lying in a coma on the other side of town.

He cleared his throat, then looked back at his hands.

"Where is Prince Charming now?" he asked as he pulled tight the last stitch. "He run off after another princess? Shitty fairytale."

Rita felt the heat rise in her face. Deep down, she knew he was being kind, but his word cut deeper than her assailant's knife. Words of hate welled up in her mouth, but footsteps sounded above them. Chem's friends had come home.

"We're done here." She slid off the table and gave him a nod. It was all she could offer.

She turned toward the window, but he grabbed her before she could leave. His grip was firm, but gentle. "Maybe it's finally time you had somebody in the fight with you. We can do this, Rita. *Together*."

Her stomach dropped to her heels. His words cut her to the core. *Together*. A word she didn't know. Didn't need. Her eyes burned, and she didn't turn back toward him. She couldn't let him see the tears already sliding down her scaled cheeks.

Rita's eyes shot to the file folder holding the dirt she had on him. He must have been ruminating on it since she didn't show at the old diner. Fear of her and what she could do was his inspiration. His one love was his only pursuit. She knew he would rather gut her than help her. She cursed herself for falling for his ruse.

"There's no *together*," she hissed. Whether the instinct was animal or human, she couldn't be sure, but something deep inside propelled Rita to shove him away. As he stumbled backward, she raised a deadly claw in his direction, and for a beat, considered using it to open him up. "You're doing this for Vida. I am only a means to an end. You don't give two shits about me."

"Chem!" the muffled voice came from upstairs.

"Just do your job," she spat at him.

Before he could speak again, she was gone.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE



“Shit, shit, shit,” Elijah grunted as Willa helped lower him down the stairs. “Why am I always the one getting shot at?”

“Well,” she said like she was explaining it to a child. “A giant burning ball of Play-Doh like yourself is quite the target.”

“Good point,” he said. “Next time, why don’t you jump into molten steel, and I’ll study some poetry. ‘Hope is the thing with—’ fuck, that hurts.”

“Sorry,” Willa said moving her hand. “And maybe don’t quit history anytime soon.”

“Personally, I like it better than the original.”

Elijah looked down at the tall man waiting for them in the basement. He let out a sigh of relief. Chem was here. He’d be able to help.

“Well man, I’ll write you all the romantic poetry you want, once you get this bullet out of my arm.”

Chem grimaced as he eased Elijah onto the table. “Shit. Looks like you two had some fun tonight.”

Willa laughed as she collapsed into Chem’s desk chair. “That’s one way to put it.”

“Oh you know,” Elijah said trying to ignore the pain as Chem started poking. “What else is there to do around here on a weekday?”

“I’ve always preferred watching gangster movies to starring in them,” Chem said as he stood. “You may have been shot, but there’s no bullet here. Barely even a wound. My guess is your transformation took care of it.”

“Finally,” Elijah said. “Something positive about melting from the inside out. But why does it hurt so damn much?”

Chem shrugged. “Probably psychosomatic. You’ve never been shot before, right?”

“Nope. I tried to stick to knife fights back in grad school.”

“Well, the shock will wear off once your adrenaline stops pumping. For someone so damn stupid you get pretty lucky.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Elijah said. “Save the lecture for another day, will ya. I’m beat. And soaked. What the hell is all over your bench?”

Elijah pushed himself up and looked down. There was a small film

of water on the table. Chem glanced toward the far corner, as if he were looking for something.

“Just doing some disinfecting before I was interrupted by the Super Twins. A clean lab is a happy lab, and all that. Guess I have to start all over again now that you lathered it up with your man-mank. Why don’t you go get a shower before I patch you up?”

“Sure. I imagine I smell pretty rank.” Elijah said, still looking at the water. Then he touched it, and raised it to his nose. “Wait a minute. It’s not me that smells, it’s this cleaning stuff. It smells like...fish or something.”

Elijah froze. Then he looked at Willa. Her eyes went wide.

Chem turned around to look at his friend. And Elijah held his wet hand up to him. “Chem, what the hell is this?”

“It’s nothing man, I told you—”

“It’s true, isn’t it? You *are* working with her.” Elijah tried to keep the fury from his voice, but it wasn’t working.

“What the hell, Chem?” Willa’s words sounded more tired than angry. But the poet didn’t curse lightly. Elijah could tell she shared his sentiments.

“It’s not what it looks like,” Chem said backing away. “Rita, she’s —”

“You named her Rita?” Willa said.

“Damnit,” Elijah said. “It makes so much sense now.”

“Elijah...”

“No,” Willa said. “He’s right. You’ve been acting...different lately. And it’s because you know what The Creature is. You’ve known all along. She’s another one of your experiments, isn’t she? And those men she’s been taking? That’s for you.”

“You both need to chill the hell out for a second,” Chem said. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh, really?” Willa said. Elijah looked over at her and saw a beat up manilla envelope in one hand and a stack of papers in the other. “Then tell us, Percy, what’s The Vida Serum.”

Chem snapped it out of her hand. “That’s none of your business.”

“Rizzo tried to tell us.” Elijah was fuming. “All of this is your fault.”

“You’re going to believe that crook now? Over me?”

“Easier to trust a crook than a liar,” Elijah shouted. “You’re not trying to cure me at all, are you. Every test is just another excuse for you to draw my blood for your twisted experiments. You told me you were done with this super-soldier stuff. After what happened last February, after what happened to Brooke. She died because of you and your damn Vida Serum, Chem. And here you are, doing it all over again, releasing that monster out onto the streets. Everything you

touch leads to death.”

Chem stared at him, with murder in his eyes. He didn't yell, but that didn't lessen the impact of his words. “Brooke died because you weren't strong enough to save her. And you're still not strong enough. Playing superman won't bring her back, and if you keep running around with your head up your ass, you'll die along with her. You're no hero, Elijah. You're nothing but a two-bit historian, and that's all you'll ever be.”

“Percy,” Willa said, her voice a mix of shock and pain. “Why are you doing this? What's going on? We can help you.”

“I don't need your help,” he said. “I don't need anyone. From now on you can patch up your own damned wounds.”

Chem slid his medical bag across the table toward Willa and stormed out of the basement.

CHAPTER FORTY



Ford had to put his shoulder into the door to get it to budge. Bobby's house had started to lean over the years. Like most houses in the neighborhood, it derived its character equally from its noble past and its dilapidated present. No one knew if it would be standing too much longer into the future.

It seemed peace wasn't in the cards for the Steel City.

Ford crept in, hoping not to wake Bobby. He had no idea what time it was, and he didn't relish coming up with an explanation for why he had been out so late, or why he was currently bleeding in the kitchen.

Oh, you know, the usual Tuesday night. Wrestling crocodiles. Swimming with Piranhas. Knife-fighting tree frogs.

As Ford began the pleasant work of patching himself up, he ran through the fight in his mind. The thing was tougher than the nuns at his old Catholic School and just as charming. Ford got the last shot at it, losing his Blackbow knife in the process. But he was pretty sure that if the melee went on much longer, he would have been bested by The Creature.

The Creature. The words swirled in his head like some strange new-age mantra. Watching it launch out of the air to attack Big Lou, he could see Rizzo's point. The thing *was* a menace, and a damn scary one at that, and it seemed to have an appetite for yinzer meat. If that thing traveled in numbers, Pittsburgh would be underwater by winter.

As he played the thing's moves in his mind again, something didn't square. It had an animal ferocity to it—and an instinctual knowledge of how to make a target bleed. But it also moved cautiously. Intently. With deadly reason.

Ford had been hunting his whole life and had never known anything to think like that but humans—like the human currently sneaking in behind him. Ford pretended not to notice the squeak of the floorboard or the scuff of shoe against tile. But he reached for a knife all the same, and with one quick motion he had the blade pointed at the smiling face of Anthony Rizzo.

"Charming place you've got here." The man looked around the room like he owned it.

"By all means," Ford said, "make yourself at home."

"Don't mind if I do," Rizzo said, his scar dancing in the dim light as he spoke. "Door was open, thought you wouldn't mind. Didn't want to wake that handicapper if I knocked."

Ford fought the urge to see how accurately he could throw the kitchen knife. If Rizzo was here, he had a battalion waiting just outside. Ford risked a glance at Bobby's closed door.

Rizzo pulled a rickety chair out across the linoleum floor and sat, placing his hands on the table. "Looks like you had some fun tonight. I'm guessing by the fact that you're currently crocheting yourself up that things didn't go according to plan."

"I underestimated my target. It won't happen again." Ford looked Rizzo over, noticing that something wasn't quite right with the man. His breath was ragged—his eyes swollen. And there was faint bruising above his collar. "You look like you had some fun tonight as well."

All pretense of warmth drained from Rizzo's face. "The bastards came to my house tonight, Ford. My *fucking* house."

Ford pictured scaled bodies climbing down Rizzo's chimney, but the old mobster seemed to know what Ford was thinking and cut him off. "Not lizards. So far as I can tell she's one of a kind. But she's got allies. I believe you've already seen The Foundry. He mowed my men down with a desk and ripped a hole in the side of my house."

"Shit," Ford said.

"He's a baby deer compared to the other one. The Poet."

"What the hell are these things?" Ford asked. He felt like Pittsburgh had sunken into the Twilight Zone.

"They're threats," Rizzo said. "Threats to you, me, and anyone who lives in this city."

Ford weighed the man's words. Thought again what a thing like that could do to Bobby—or anyone he loved. "What do we do?"

"We start hitting them where it hurts, and we don't stop. The freaks may have gotten the drop on all of us tonight, but I didn't come out empty handed. I know who they're working with. A back-alley doctor who's been leeching off these streets for years. My guess is that these monsters came from a petri dish growing in the mad scientist's lab. We take him, the monsters will come crawling."

"Monsters are one thing." Ford hesitated. "I told you I was no criminal, and unless things have changed since I left, kidnapping crosses a few legal lines."

Rizzo shrugged. "Get the scientist, get the freaks—all together, all at once. It's the way. He's behind all of this madness."

"He's still human," Ford said. "Why not just call the cops?"

"You think a bunch of boys in blue with flashing lights can take these things on? The freaks will tear through them like butter." Rizzo

grinned. "I thought you loved this city, Ford."

"Still—"

Rizzo slammed his hand on the table. "Fuck your moral lines, Ford. This is war—and I need a warrior. In all your years of fighting, you never heard the term collateral damage? This man is the enemy. And I know just how much quarter Blackbow taught you to show to the enemy."

"I quit Blackbow."

"Doesn't change who you are," Rizzo said. "You're a killer. It's time you stopped running from that and finally embrace it. This city needs a killer like you. Your friend Bobby *needs* a killer. We wouldn't want anything bad to happen to him, now, would we?"

There was no mistaking the threat in Rizzo's voice. Ford took a step toward him and found himself staring down the barrel of a pistol. *Shit.*

There weren't many men who could get the drop on Tim Ford.

"See," Rizzo laughed. "There's the fire I need, right there in your eyes. Look at you. It's amazing really. You're doing the math, aren't you? Figurin' if you can get me before I lay some lead in your sorry ass. Thinking you could maybe take a bullet in the shoulder. No big deal, right, Ford? There is an ounce of self-control left in that war-addled mind of yours." Rizzo paused. The gun stayed its mark. "You know about the centaur, Ford?"

Ford said nothing. He could barely think over the sound of cannons going off in his brain.

"Oh, come on. The fucking centaur. The mind of a human mixed with the shit-kicking passion of a wild beast. Those Greeks knew a thing or two, and it's not just that gyro sauce they use. Half-man, half-animal, all warrior. That's what you are, Ford. That's what we need. Except you seem to have forgotten that. You're over here playing philosopher when you should be sharpening your blades."

"You should know," Ford said. "I don't take threats to my people lightly."

Rizzo squinted his eyes. "I'm sorry," he said, putting the gun away. "Look, I crossed a line there. Old habits. And like I said, those things came to my house tonight. I also don't take threats to my people lightly. I want you to work *with* me, Ford—of your own accord." Rizzo stood, not taking his eyes off him. "The easiest way to end this is by going after the doctor. We use him to take out the freaks, and then we all move on with our lives. You and me and Bobby. And the city sleeps a little more peacefully. Isn't that what war is for? Making peace?"

Ford took a breath, but he couldn't silence the sound of gunfire running through his head.

"I need a name."

Rizzo smiled. "I can do you one better. I can give you an address."

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE



Chem had never been a very good sleeper. As a child, he would lay in bed for hours counting sheep and thinking about pretty girls. It was amazing the way his mind always worked in two directions at once. But then grad school and medical school really did him in. There were times when he would go two or three days with not much more than a couple of naps and a six-pack of Redbull. Not always by choice, of course. Most often the grueling demands of schooling required the hours.

But tonight, it wasn't his work that kept him from dreams. It was the words spoken in anger between him and his only friends in the city.

Chem turned over from his right side onto his left and tried to get comfortable. After storming out of house, he wandered the streets alone until he found himself at Voodoo. With nothing better to do and nowhere else to go, Chem decided to self-medicate.

But a few lonesome beers weren't enough to take his mind off of the fight.

Elijah could be such an asshole, so confident of what he knew so little about. And Willa, with her self-righteous posturing was no better. They were fools, both of them. They had no idea just how much Chem had risked for them. How much he had sacrificed. They had no idea what he had gone through for Vida.

It wasn't what they had called him that kept him from sleeping. He had been called much worse, many times before.

What really kept him tossing and turning were the words he said to them.

He was angry, hurt by their accusations so he lashed out. But none of what he said was true. They were some of the smartest people he knew, and if they applied their minds and their powers, he had no doubt they could do some good in this city. But their intelligence didn't stop them from acting like assholes.

But how else did he expect them to act? They were more often than not flying blind, chasing whatever slight clues they'd been able to cobble together, and he certainly had not helped. He'd been lying to them since the day they met. They couldn't know about Vida, and

now, about Rita. They couldn't know shit, because he didn't tell them.

He wondered if he had misjudged Rita the same way they had.

It had been easy enough to keep his distance from her emotionally when she was his enemy, and easier still when she was just another subject, some entity of wonder for his scientific mind to grapple with. But now, knowing parts of Rita's story, everything was different. His posture toward her had turned from scientific curiosity to something very different. Something every teacher he ever had implored him to avoid.

Sympathy.

Maybe even empathy.

Over the past six months, he had made peace with the paranormal. Or, perhaps, more accurately, he had decided that the things marked out as such weren't necessarily abnormal but rather a normal, seldom encountered by common human experience. Outliers of the population that lay hidden beyond the eyes of common humanity. There was a scientific explanation for what his serum had done to Brooke Alarawn, at least half of its effects.

Now, he was certain that he could figure out what had made Elijah turn. Likewise, he knew that with enough study, and access to what the hell was in the water that Rita nearly drowned in the night of her accident, he could figure out the catalyst of her transformation.

There was the truck—it could have been transporting almost anything. Plus, Chem knew there was plenty of shit in the rivers of Pittsburgh throughout the years that had done all kinds of nasty things to people. It was the Rust Belt, after all. Maybe the Cancer Belt would've been a better name. Even if he didn't need to know exactly what made her change, his curiosity ran wild. What sort of industry might do this to someone? Might cover up a spill or even dump something so nefarious that it could change the structure of a human into a monster? His mind ran down the trail for a while, and he knew, maybe for the first time, that he could help. If progress had broken her, it might just be the thing to offer the cure.

And, he could fix things with Elijah and Willa too. But to do that, he needed to apologize.

"No time like the present," he said to himself. He threw off his sheets, and immediately felt cold steel on his neck.

"Hello, Chem. You're coming with me."

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO



Chem's eyes shot open, and he found himself looking into the steely blue eyes of an unfamiliar face leaning over him in his bed.

"What the—" The man clamped his hand over Chem's mouth and gave his head a little shake.

"I'm not against cutting you or your friend next door," the man whispered. "If you know what's good for you *and* for him, you'll keep your damn mouth shut and come quietly."

Chem, allergic to having his throat slit, gave the man a nod.

"Good. Now, stand up slowly and get dressed."

Chem gave him another slight nod, and the man took his hand off of Chem's mouth. Adrenaline coursed through his body. He lay still for a moment, considering his options. Nothing but begging for his life came to mind. He figured he would save the blubbing and his pride.

The figure stood, and Chem eyed him up. Though Chem beat him in inches, the man absolutely crushed the chemist in pounds of muscle. He wore a cut-off flannel exposing arms like a bodybuilder. A red handkerchief covered his mouth, like a bandit in an old-time western. Dirty blond waves hung down over his ears.

Chem eased out of bed, careful not to make any sudden moves, and reached down to the floor where his jeans and T-shirt lay waiting for him. He pulled them on slowly, silently. Part of him wanted Elijah to hear what was going on, to bust into the room and go all molten-man on this son of a bitch. But from the looks of the guy, Chem wasn't convinced that Elijah, even with his powers, would stand a chance.

Chem reached for his phone on the bedside table, and the man shook his head. "Leave it. You're not going to need it."

"Okay, Annie Oakley, but people are gonna get really suspicious when I don't update my Instagram."

The cowboy gave Chem a half chuckle. "I'm sure the world can survive a morning without your selfies."

The man had a sense of humor, which inspired some sort of hope. If he could laugh, then he couldn't be *all* bad.

He nodded toward door, and Chem walked out first. He had been around the lawbreaking community long enough to know that this is the way that it went down. Keep things calm. Controlled. He stepped

out into the living room and was welcomed by silence. He gave one last thought to shouting out for Elijah, but he was a bit too afraid that that might just finish the night with a blade in his back and him bleeding out on their fancy new IKEA rug.

Chem paused and looked toward the basement, where he had left his medical bag. "Should I grab..." He nodded toward the door, wondering if he was being snatched for some covert medicinal purpose.

"You won't be needing that either. Let's go." The cowboy's eyes were on the door, and Chem got the picture. He walked out of the house and down the steps. The night was cooler than it had been for weeks, a little break from an early summer swelter, but sweat beaded up on his brow nevertheless. Looking up and down the street, Chem only hoped that someone would see the situation and realize that something was not quite right. But it was too early for the joggers and too late for the drunks.

"Get in the truck," the man grunted.

Chem kept walking toward a rusted-out, old Ford Ranger. Chem had seen dissected frogs that looked more alive than the truck. "Nice ride. You must really be moving up in the world."

"Traded in the Tesla for this beauty. Now, shut the hell up."

Not knowing who he was dealing with, or why, Chem decided to obey the order, and he climbed into the passenger side looking for anything that might be useful in his current situation. Before he could make a move, the man got in behind the wheel.

Reaching down to the compartment on the door, the man pulled out a long black cable tie and passed it over to Chem. "You know what to do with this."

Chem grabbed it and held it up in the glow of the streetlights. "My grandfather, he did just about anything with these things. Pappy always said, 'Nothing a cable tie and a little imagination can't do.' By the look of your truck, I can see you're a student of that particular philosophy." He looked at the man and raised his brows. "But I'm more of a duct tape man myself. You feel me?"

The man stared at him hard and remained silent. So much for his good material. Chem shrugged and fastened the black plastic around his wrists pulling it moderately snug with his teeth.

"Tighter," the man urged.

Chem obeyed. The cowboy turned the key, and miraculously the Ranger growled to life. Throwing it into gear, Chem's captor eased off the clutch and rolled the truck down the street. They drove quiet for a while, across the Homestead Grays Bridge and back toward downtown. They were in familiar territory, but Chem kept his eyes open, making sure to keep track of their path anyway.

Just before the Squirrel Hill Tunnels, the man exited the highway and took a road that Chem had never driven. They twisted through an area that looked more like a suburb than Pittsburgh proper. Chem counted every turn. Eventually, they wound back down toward the river. Rolling past broken-down houses and then a few abandoned industrial buildings, they finally ended up on an access road in disrepair, something between broken up asphalt and gravel. The truck kicked back and forth as it rambled down the road. Branches slapped at its body.

"Okay, pal," Chem said. "Let's skip the preliminaries. You know, like the 'who are you and why the hell did you just pull me out of my cozy bed?' I know I won't get that out of you, but let's try this one on: This is about my work, right?"

The man's eyes were fastened dead ahead, his face stone sober.

"Not much for conversation, are you? Okay, let me try again. I mean, there's plenty of people I've pissed off in this world. I don't imagine the University sent you, although I think they'd like to have all their shit that I've stolen throughout the years back. You with one of those gang bangers? I mean, you seem a little... white bread for those guys. And don't go calling me racist."

Chem look over at him, watching for some sort of reaction. There was none.

"You also don't look like you're connected with Brooke Alarawn, she was one smooth broad. No offense, but I'm not putting you in the high-end category. But, I could imagine you being somehow associated with that bald motherfucker that she worked with. You workin' for Rex?"

The man glanced over. Still no response on his face.

Chem laughed. "You're not making this easy on me. Listen if this is some sort of freaky-deaky sex slavery thing, you're wasting your time. I tried that before. I'm not as marketable as I used to be, and as you might know, I have some friends who will go all Liam Neeson on your tough white ass." Chem stopped, watching him closely. "Give me something, asshole."

He cracked half a smile. "Sex slavery joke. Good one. *Real* classy."

"And... He speaks."

"Let's just say that you're a tool."

Chem couldn't help but smile. "I've been called worse things."

No laugh this time. "You're a means to an end. If you behave, things will go just fine. Help me get what I need, and you'll be back to your dark arts before you know it."

"Didn't peg you for a Potter fan. You a Hufflepuff?"

The truck started to slow as it approached the building that looked like only a million others surrounding Pittsburgh. Large, and built of

steel, it sat silhouetted by some dim auxiliary lights on the property. A row of trees separated the structure from a set of railroad tracks running adjacent to the river. Railroads, rivers, and bridges, it pretty much summed up the Steel City. They could be anywhere.

"Nice place. But I wouldn't bet on the gentrifiers coming through here anytime soon. Damn bastards. Sure, your property values are going to go through the roof though, but what about the rest of us?"

The man pulled up in front of a single door on the side of the structure.

"You know what time it is?" he asked Chem.

Chem glanced down his wrist, where his Swatch watch would normally be. He thought about it sitting on his bedside table back at the house, which made him wish that he was still in bed sleeping. "No idea. I mean, I was happy as a bug in a rug until the Toothless Fairy showed up and carried my sorry ass away from it all."

"It's time to shut the hell up." The man threw the truck into reverse and shut the engine down. "Let's go."

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE



The ground squished beneath Rita's webbed feet, still wet as a sponge from yesterday's rain. But the sweltering heat had returned, a reminder of how brutal Pittsburgh could actually be in the summertime. She hated this place. But this kind of weather made finding her next mark easier than the last. He was a creature of habit, and she had watched him for long enough. Oppressive heat and a lazy afternoon meant he could only be one place.

He was close. She could smell him.

Twigs barely snapped as she crept silently up the hillside toward the sound of laughing children. They were to be expected. They were always there.

At the top of the rise she got down low and crouched, ambling along nearly on all fours like the animal she had become. Getting to the chain-link fence, she turned and ducked behind the cinder-block box, which protected the aging pump and piping. The heat was starting to get to her, or maybe it was her emotions. Rita couldn't be sure. She pressed the balls of her hands against her eye sockets, hoping to relieve the pressure that had built up behind her eyes.

This mission was a devastating one. If staying away were a choice, she would've chosen it, had in fact managed to avoid him for months. But Chem's words triggered old feelings in Rita, reawakened old desires. Her animal self drove her to hunt and to hide. Her new body demanded that she live half of her life submerged in the dirty rivers. But this desire, the one she now pursued, was the product of her very human needs.

Maybe they were needs she could one day meet again.

As she moved out from behind her cover, she saw him immediately. Mike Taylor, her old lover, her old life. Just beyond the splash pad, where kids ran and screamed and squealed, he lay on a blanket, torso propped up on angled arms. Rita's stomach turned when she saw he wasn't alone. A woman reclined on the grass next to him. Rita couldn't see her clearly, but by the way Mike smiled when he looked at her, the way he tenderly stroked her face showed Rita enough.

He had found someone else.

"Dammit," she hissed to herself. Rita wanted to run, but she couldn't. A mix of hope and pain held her in the spot.

The man turned to the woman next to him and said something just inches from her ear. She laughed and elbowed him playfully. Rita knew this part too well. Grabbing something from a tote bag in the grass, he walked out toward the exit of the chain-link fence. His spot was closer to Rita's vantage point. It's why she chose it in the first place. Heart pounding in her chest, she wondered if this would be the day.

From where she crouched, she could see him. Six foot three and somewhat athletic. But he had put on weight over the winter, that was obvious. She almost laughed when she noticed several days of scruff on his cheeks. Was he growing a beard?

He lit a cigarette and drew a long drag.

Rita shook her head. Years ago, she would give him shit over and over again about his smoking. She hated it. The smell, the cost, and the fact that he wouldn't give it up, not even for her. Mike always laughed it off. He stood there, looking almost exactly the way he did when they were still together, just as carefree as when Rita had been the woman by his side. Back when she was engaged to be Mrs. Mike Taylor.

Maybe, she could be again. She wanted to reach out to him, wanted to say something. Maybe he'd understand. Rita opened her mouth.

"Mike."

Rita ducked behind the wall as Mike smiled and turned back toward the park. His woman walked toward him, laughing as she said his name. She reached out, grabbed the cigarette from his lips and crushed it beneath her shoe. He nodded, apologizing for his action. *Maybe this stranger could convince him to quit for good.*

The woman said something that Rita couldn't hear, but then she watched in horror as Mike placed his hand on the woman's stomach. The truth of the situation dawned on Rita. Mike wouldn't quit for her, but for the baby growing inside of her.

Rita couldn't take it any longer. She was a fool for coming here, a fool for believing that Chem could save her. No matter what his science wrought, her old life was over. Chem was right, this *was* a shitty fairy tale.

She stood to leave, and a twig snapped under her foot. Mike's head swiveled, his gaze trained in her direction. She cursed and sprinted down the hill. The wind whipped her yellow raincoat, and she knew he probably caught a glimpse.

It didn't matter. In his mind, Rita was dead.

Maybe it would be better off if she was.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR



Elijah spent a pitiful night tossing and turning—his argument with Chem playing on an endless loop, his anger growing with each pass.

With all that they'd been through together, Elijah couldn't fathom that Chem had been lying to them the whole time. Every act of assistance, every beer they'd shared, every test session—Chem used all of it to manipulate Elijah. All so the mad scientist could get rich off his damn Vida Serum—whatever it was.

If Chem made The Creature, if she was a product of his dirty science, then the blood she spilled was on his hands.

As morning light replaced the darkness, Elijah made a decision. He would move out—today. Any association with Chem would cease. Elijah would no longer be party to whatever hell Chem was creating.

He stormed out of his room and pounded on Chem's door. No answer.

Resisting the urge to smash it to pieces, Elijah tried the knob. It spun, and the door swung wide.

"Chem?" Elijah asked as he stepped through.

Unlike the cluttered lab in the basement, Chem's room was almost spartan, evidence of nights spent elsewhere.

Probably out experimenting on the city, Elijah thought.

He turned to leave when he noticed a note lying on the pillow. Elijah walked forward. Harsh, angry letters scrawled hastily across the yellow paper.

I have the doctor. Bring The Poet and The Creature, or you'll never see him again.

Elijah stumbled backward, all feelings of anger drained away. He picked up his phone and dialed the first number in his contacts.

"Will, it's Chem. Something happened to him. Something bad. And we need to save him."

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE



Plastic cable ties.

A quick fix for a two-bit thug who left his handcuffs at home.

Chem assumed that the guy who snatched him had a duffel bag full of the damn things in the back of his truck. It wasn't the man's first rodeo, and Chem calculated that his chances for escape were slim to none. Thankfully, Chem had shed his inexperience years ago. So, a slim chance was more than enough to climb out of the shitstorm he had fallen into.

The cowboy had shoved him roughly into a chair, then tied him and the chair to a steel support beam holding up the small warehouse. The cable ties across his wrists seemed excessive, and Chem had said so. But if his kidnapper was the pitying kind, he showed no signs of it. After securing Chem, he grabbed his duffel bag and went outside.

Chem looked around the room in hopes that there might be something to assist his escape. But there was nothing within reach. This guy was good.

But Chem knew *he* was better.

As he surveyed the scene, the truck just outside the warehouse started up, and Chem heard the gravel crunch under the tires as it started to roll. In under a minute the sound vanished down the road leading back toward civilization. He was alone.

Time to get to work.

The tensile strength of the cable ties were over a hundred pounds, which meant they were damn tough, and Mr. Mercenary had doubled up on them.

Racking his brain, Chem tried to remember every crappy action movie he'd ever seen. He looked down at his thumbs. Dislocation? He shook his head. There wasn't a chance in hell he was going to try that Jason Bourne shit.

There had to be a better way. Even though Chem's skills precluded daring feats of escape artistry, he *did* have an above average knowledge of practical plasticity. He knew the wonder material was a polymer, made up of long chains, which consisted of mostly carbon atoms with a good bit of hydrogen, sulfur, and oxygen mixed in with it. And more importantly, these compounds oxidized when heated.

Generally speaking, around 212°F, give or take.

For the first time ever, Chem wished that he had the flaming arms of Elijah at the ready. He smiled as he imagined snapping the ties and rope like dental floss and shoving his size 13s up the man's ass. But Chem held no such power, and after a brief struggle against the tie, he stared forlornly at his boots.

"Oh... That might be it."

Besides his massive brain, god had endowed him with other larger than average body parts. Not that he was bragging. For five years in middle and high school, Chem's massive feet far outgrew the rest of him, which meant he was a stumbling mess whenever he tried to walk or run until his legs caught up.

What screwed him in high school, especially with his chances at making captain and convincing the head cheerleader to go to prom with him, saved him now. If only he could reach.

He bent at the waist as far as he could. The ropes cinched his gut, pinching the folds of his skin as he stretched toward the ground. But a little rope-induced monkey bite was a lot better than being gutted by the freak of nature who had just taken off in the truck. He pulled his feet up under his ass, resting his heels on the edge of the chair.

"Should have done more yoga," he sighed. "Little Miss Magic Mouth would have no problem with this."

With a final grunt, he grabbed hold of his boots. His fingers moved quickly untying the thick parachute cord he used for laces. Taking one end, he fed it between his wrists so that it draped over his plastic restraints. Then he tied a loop on each end slipping them over the toes of his boots.

"Dear God, if you exist. Make this work."

But, like in most of his life, Chem knew he didn't need prayer. He had science, and he trusted it more than any deity.

He let his legs extend, exerting pressure on the plastic. And then, as if he were riding a bike, he extended his right leg out in front of him drawing his left up. Then he pushed his left out, bringing the right up.

"Uh, I'll take Friction for \$800, Alex."

Three more moves and the heat cut through the ties like grass. They snapped and fell to the ground.

"Hell yeah!"

Chem rubbed his wrists before straining to untie the rope behind his back. The cowboy must've been a Boy Scout on steroids because it took Chem nearly fifteen minutes to undo the mess without being able to see it.

Unwinding himself from his constraint, he stood, arching his back. It felt good, but not as good as getting the hell out of this psychopath's

freaky man cave. Without another thought, he sprinted for the door. He had no idea when the dude would be back, but once out into the open, Chem would run like hell until he found civilization.

He figured the door would give him some trouble, but Mr. McKidnappy had left it open. Chem smiled. It wasn't the first time he had been underestimated.

"Pride cometh before your prisoner high tails it the hell out of here."

He pulled open the door and stepped out into the dim morning air. It was hot, humid, and sticky, but Chem didn't care. He was a free man.

For two whole seconds.

"So you tried the shoelace trick, huh?" The gruff voice asked. Chem looked to the right. Standing there was the bastard who had taken him hostage or captive or whatever and he was pointing at the p-cord still hanging in Chem's right hand. The auxiliary lights in the parking lot caught the six-inch blade in the man's right hand, more than sharp enough to cut down Chem's dreams.

"Hey," he said, in a failed attempt to sound casual. "I thought you had gone. Just stepping out to take a leak. You don't mind, right?"

The man stepped toward Chem. "Figured you'd try to be cute, so I decided to 'leave' and see what you were capable of. Now I know. They weren't lying about your skills. You're smart. Probably kick my ass at Trivial Pursuit. But I've spent half my life taking down men smarter than me. It's the only superpower I need."

"Did you say your superpower is going down on intelligent men?" Chem quipped. "More than I needed to know, Champ. A bit outside of Marvel canon, but to each his own, I guess."

The man held up his knife. "Go," he said, nodding towards the warehouse. Chem followed the order without a fight.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX



“Come on, man. This really necessary?” Chem groaned as the wanna-be bandit wrapped his wrists in a length of chain. His arms were now behind his back wrapped around the pole.

“After what you just pulled off? Yeah. I’d say it’s necessary.”

“I just got lucky. Can’t happen twice in one day.”

“Warfare is 90% about beating back the odds. I’d rather be prepared than trust my fate to the roll of a die.”

“So you *have* seen war?” Chem smiled. “I figured as much.”

The man ignored him, finished his work, and walked across the room. He stood by a window glancing down at his phone and then back at the lot. Chem still had no idea what his play was, or if he even had one. He could be keeping an eye out for directions from his boss—whether to kill Chem or let him live. Or he could be keeping up with his damn penny stocks for all Chem knew.

It looked like science wasn’t getting Chem out of this one, so he thought he would try his other major skill. Annoyance. “All right, buddy. You got me chained up, safe and sound, and it looks like you’re just biding time before you do whatever it is you’re gonna to do with me.” The man looked up at Chem. “This is the time we slip into your evil-villain monologue. You know, ‘If it wasn’t for those meddling kids, I would’ve gotten away with it’ kind of thing. So what do you say? Drop me some unnecessary information about your evil plan?”

“I’m the villain?” The soldier turned to look at him. His eyes smiled overtop of the bandana. “Really?”

Chem raised his eyebrows. “Kidnapping is a Class-A crime, Wild Bill.”

“How much stolen lab equipment do you have in your basement?”

“*Borrowed*, not stolen.” Chem said. “I’m planning on returning all of it.”

“Three men have gone missing in the last week. Do you know what happened to them?”

“That,” Chem paused. “I can explain that.”

“And what about the executive board of Alarawn Industries? What about Brooke Alarawn? All slaughtered last winter. Can you explain

those deaths?"

"That wasn't my fault—"

"But you were involved. Your science had something to do with it, yeah?"

Shit. So this soldier had Chem's number. This was no ordinary criminal.

"Okay," Chem said. "Okay. When you put it like that, I guess maybe it's time for *my* villain's monologue. But you got this all wrong, man. You got me all wrong. You could never understand. From where I sit, you don't seem so righteous yourself. I just got my ass kidnapped, tied up in some warehouse by the river, and I'm waiting for an unknown fate. If you're not the villain, what's your move?"

The man stood and stared at Chem, clearly considering how much to share and why. His face didn't look cold, but more like it was trained to be absent. Vacant of any tells.

Finally, he spoke, "Never claimed to be righteous, friend. Far from it. But this," he motioned toward Chem and his chains, "I'm doing this for the city. I need to. Can't have a bunch of freaks running around the streets causing mayhem. Pittsburgh deserves better than that." There was hesitation in his voice.

"They're not..." Chem thought for a second then switched tactics. "Okay, they *are* freaks. That's a fair description. But in science, freaky just means something we don't understand yet. And trust me, True Grit, we could spend the week talking about what you don't know and don't understand."

The soldier stepped closer and Chem fought the urge not to flinch at the coming torture, but he didn't strike him. Instead, the man rolled up his sleeve and revealed a hastily stitched wound right beneath a tattoo.

"I know The Creature is a killer."

"I hear it takes one to know one," Chem said. The man sneered and turned away. So Chem decided to keep pushing. "Rita...she's not the nicest girl I ever brought home, true. But she's not what she looks like."

The man laughed. "You call *it* Rita?"

"As far as I can tell, her parents gave her the name. You got parents?"

"And what about, The Foundry?" he asked. "What do you call him?"

Chem smiled. "Elijah Branton, PhD. He's an historian actually—not a killer."

The man fell quiet, but Chem could tell that he was seething. "Your historian almost hit me with a burning car the other night. If he's no killer, it's because he lacks aim."

“That...” Chem laughed. “You really are full of shit, man. He was trying to protect people, moving the car to a safe place. He was trying to be a hero—which I agree, is a pretty stupid thing to do. Seems like you’ve sampled the same water though?”

“And what about the hole he ripped through Anthony Rizzo’s mansion last night. That an accident?”

Chem smiled. Now they were getting somewhere. “So, you are working for Rizzo. Same as those poor missing murderers. I’m sure they were all devoted protectors of Pittsburgh.”

“I’m nothing like them,” he said.

“You might be able to out bench them, but you’re still dancing to Rizzo’s tune. Tell me, since you’re so concerned with this city, how many people OD’d this year on the drugs Rizzo pushes? How many innocent people have his men put in the ground over the years? I may not be a saint, but if you’re concerned with monsters infesting the city, you should take a look in the mirror, pal.”

The man clenched his fists, then relaxed them. It looked to Chem like he was fighting the urge to explode.

“You don’t know shit about me.” He looked back out the window as he fished a pack of smokes out the pockets of his jeans. “Don’t get too comfortable. We’ll be moving out soon.”

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN



Willa checked that no one could see them before jumping over the guardrail and working her way down the hill. She heard the scuffle of Elijah's shoes as he followed close behind.

Pittsburgh, with its three rivers and maze of bridges and roads, contained more than its fair share of dark, rarely searched corners. The city was built on top of a network of overpasses and culverts and stone foundations. The average citizen never ventured down to this underworld—there was no need.

But Willa and Elijah were no average citizens, and her finding magic drew them here.

They moved quickly, skirting the narrow edge of the river. The bright light of the morning sun made stealth impossible, but they couldn't hold off until nightfall. The clock ticked steadily onward. Evening would be too late, so they chose the day and the risks that accompanied it. Willa breathed a sigh of relief as they passed into the cool shade of a bridge.

A splash echoed off the old stone walls and Willa turned, ready to blast whatever creature lunged from the river. But all she saw was Elijah pulling his boat shoe out of the muck. His khaki pant leg was wet up to the knee.

"I've got to say," Elijah huffed as he tried to shake the water off, "I'm in no way surprised that Fish Chick would live in a place like this. It smells like shit down here. What is that?"

Willa thought for a second, then shrugged. "If I had to guess? Shit."

Elijah looked down at his foot and sighed. "Fucking Pittsburgh."

For once, Willa was inclined to agree.

Heading into The Creature's turf was beyond stupid. But she and Elijah agreed that they had no choice. They still didn't know the extent of Chem's relationship with the river monster, or why someone would kidnap Chem over it. His deceit tainted any chance at an educated guess. But they couldn't leave him to die. Liar or no, Chem was still human. And despite Elijah's anger, Willa knew that Chem was still their friend. That had to count for something.

They reached a large drain of some kind. A weak stream of water

flowed out of it and into the river. Willa stopped and stared into the dark hole. A light breeze danced against her skin.

"Well," she said. "Do we knock?"

"You don't know any sort of 'see in the darkness' spell, do you?"

"Sorry. Afraid I am all out of sense enhancers at the moment," she said. "I *do* have a flashlight on my phone though, but it might be smarter to go in dark."

Elijah thought about it for a second. He sized up the culvert—it was big enough for them to fit through, but they'd have to crawl. "Use the light. There's no way we make it through there quietly. And if The Creature, or Rita, or whatever the hell she is is going to hear us coming, I'd rather we could see her waiting."

Willa nodded. She flicked on her light then started to climb in.

"Wait," Elijah said. "I should go first."

"Why?" Willa asked.

"Well...you know...um," Elijah stammered. He suddenly became very interested in his shoes.

"Because you're a man?" she asked with a sneer.

"It's not just that," he said. "I can also grow a layer of metal skin."

Willa rolled her eyes. "Why don't you work on having molten metal come out of your butt, because you're taking the rear. If she is waiting, I won't be able to work my magic while you're writhing on the ground in front of me, waiting to get hard."

"Wow," Elijah laughed. "I can't remember the last time I heard someone say butt as an insult. For someone who's plumbed the depths of the English language, your own vocabulary seems stuck in the third grade."

"Words have meaning," she said. "And I like to save my cuss words for when I mean them."

"Cuss words?" Elijah laughed. "Okay tough guy, you can go first."

Willa rolled her eyes then slid into the drain.

She struggled to crawl while holding her phone light in one hand. Twice she dropped it, and while she scrambled to find it, she swore she could hear the creature sliding toward them. But the demons of Willa's imagination disappeared when the light came on again.

Elijah's grunting behind her carried some measure of comfort.

"You doing okay back there?" she asked.

"You know, when you convinced me to fight crime, I thought it would be glamorous. Running around on rooftops. Driving fancy cars. Fighting with busty women in ridiculously revealing—"

"If you're about to tell me I should start wearing leather pants, then you'd be much safer crawling back out of this drain, now."

Elijah let out a breathless laugh. "I'm just saying, you left sneaking around sewer culverts out of the job description."

Willa smiled. "Well, when this is all over, I'll buy you a cape."

The tunnel carried on for what felt like miles before coming to a larger, open room. Willa could feel it, feel the air change before she saw it.

Willa whispered behind her, "Get ready."

She crawled out into the empty space and shined her phone along the walls—but they were alone. A small amount of sunlight crept down through cracks overhead, shedding light on a mural painted across the bricks.

Willa stared in awe at the work of art. A young child stood defiant amongst a broken city, looking hopefully toward a spark of green that emerged from the rubble.

"What is this," Elijah asked. He was filthy, sludge covering him from head to toe. But his sleeves were rolled up and the first five buttons of his shirt were undone. Even in the dim light, Willa could see the scar on his chest beginning to glow.

"It's some sort of access room," Willa said, pointing to the ladder that reached to the ceiling. Tunnels of various sizes, most of them made out of brick, ran in and out of the room. "I bet she could use the sewer to canvass the entire city."

"That plus the rivers," Elijah said. "She could go anywhere she wanted, undetected."

"It helps," the harsh voice came from above, "that humans are so *fucking* stupid."

Willa turned the light in time to see The Creature leaping down from some corner. Her black eyes flashed, and her yellow raincoat flapped around her like wings.

Willa tried to shout, but Rita's scaled feet hit her in the chest like a ton of bricks. She landed hard in a puddle, and her phone shattered, plunging them in darkness.

Panic threatened to overwhelm her, but she pushed it down. She tried to catch her breath, tried to find a spell. But in the dark she didn't even know how she'd aim it.

Then a scream and a fiery glow filled the room.

Suddenly, Willa was no longer cold.

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT



Watching Rita attack Willa, Elijah didn't have the chance to panic. The pain took over. The cold, the wet, the exhaustion—it all vanished as fire pulled at his arms, chest, and face.

He fell to his knees, then rose again reborn.

Rita wasted no time. Her attacks were as efficient as they were vicious, but Elijah could barely feel them. All he felt was power.

He let Rita move in, her claws doing a number on any exposed flesh she could find. Her speed got the best of him with every failed punch he threw.

The tail of her coat flapped behind her, and while she spun, landing a brutal kick to Elijah's stomach, he reached out and grabbed ahold.

Rita jerked once, hoping to pull free, but his hand was a vice. Then her panic set in. She screamed and flailed wildly, kicking and clawing, but Elijah refused to let go. He pulled her in close, grabbing her coat with his other hand.

The Creature was his now.

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE



No, no, no, no!

Rita didn't know what to do. Her stealth and speed had always kept her safe, and the few times where that was not enough, her strength carried her through. But now she was trapped. The Foundry's arms pulled her in bit by bit—his dense exterior immune to any of her weapons.

She was out of options—save one.

Her dagger like hands had no effect on Elijah's skin, but they tore through her raincoat like it was made of paper. She slashed at the thick yellow fabric across her chest and arms, and she used the power in her legs to push away from him.

Her coat ripped to shreds, and she was free.

The burning man stumbled backward, shreds of yellow flying up into his face. Rita took full advantage. She leapt and landed a foot to the side of his head.

He tripped. The force of her blow paired with his own momentum launched him backward into the stone wall. He landed hard, and a pile of brick and earth rained down around him. Part of the ceiling had fallen in, surrounding Rita in a thin shaft of light.

She turned to flee back into the darkness when the words grabbed her.

*"From the cool cisterns of the midnight air My spirit drank repose;
The fountain of perpetual peace flows there,— From those deep cisterns flows..."*

Rita couldn't move, couldn't free herself. She was trapped in the light as the poet stepped toward her.

CHAPTER FIFTY



Willa kept speaking—the constant rhythm of her words was the only thing holding Rita at bay. But she couldn't keep her eyes from roaming.

Rita's hands and feet were bathed in blood and burns, but Willa had seen them before, up close. It was Rita's body that drew her attention now. Pale scales covered her smooth body. Her arms and legs were thin, almost delicate looking, but full of obvious strength. Poise, even. Before, Willa could only see a monster, now she looked more like a ballerina. She looked almost beautiful.

Then Willa met Rita's black eyes, and she could see the fear within. The sense of urgency. The true, human emotion.

Willa hesitated, then lowered her hands—the last words of her spell unspoken.

Rita dropped into a crouch, ready to pounce again.

"It's okay," Willa said, hands raised. "I won't hurt you. We just came to talk."

The pile of rubble in the corner shifted as Elijah climbed to his feet. The metal had left him. He looked dazed, but still angry, as he took a step toward Rita. Willa held up her hand.

"Wait!"

Elijah gave her a strange look. "But Chem?"

"I know," Willa said. "Just wait."

"If this is a trick," Rita gurgled, "You'll never leave this cave."

"No trick," Willa said. "We just...we've come here because of Chem."

Rita tensed up at the name. "He sent you! That bastard."

"No," Willa replied. "He's in trouble."

Rita relaxed. "What is it?"

Willa nodded to Elijah and he pulled the ransom note out of his pocket. He held it toward Rita, and she grabbed it in a flash.

While she read, Willa kept speaking. "We don't know what's going on between you two and this person, or why they'd want you or Chem. But if it's as bad as it sounds..."

"It's worse," Rita replied. "The person who wrote this note nearly killed me." She walked toward the corner where Willa noticed a bare

mattress and a small broken nightstand. She opened the drawer and pulled out something small. It glinted in the light as she handed it to Willa.

It was a knife.

“He left *that* in my leg. Chem stitched me up. The man who has your friend is no amateur. He means what he says in the note.”

Willa studied the knife. It had a strange marking on the side. A bow with three arrows nocked and some words in Latin that Willa couldn’t fully make out in the dark. She handed it to Elijah.

“What does he want with you?” Willa asked.

Rita sat silent for a moment. “Not him. The one pulling his strings. You can’t kill and capture gangsters without a response.”

Elijah and Willa looked up at each other. “Rizzo,” Willa said.

“But why?” Elijah asked. “What are you two up to?”

Rita stared at Elijah like she wanted to attack him again. But, she stayed silent. Resolve was etched on her face.

“None of that matters now,” Willa said, before things could get out of hand. “All that matters is that we save him. Will you help us?”

When Rita finally answered, it was barely a whisper. “No.”

“What?” Elijah said. He was working to roll up what remained of his sleeves again. “You two have been tearing up this city together. I don’t know what the hell you’ve been working on—this Vida Serum or whatever—and I don’t care. Lying bastard or no, we need to save him.”

Elijah reached toward her, and Rita shot away like a rubber band. Before either of them could move, she had grabbed a sewer drain ten feet up and climbed into it.

She looked back down at them. “The way he talks about you—I thought you both would be intelligent. But you’re morons. You know nothing about your friend, and nothing about the danger he is in. If you go there tonight, you will die. You cannot beat that man. And my presence would change nothing. Take my advice and flee while you still can.”

Then she was gone.

Willa stared at the open drain, then looked back toward Elijah. He was still holding the knife in his hand.

“Fucking hell,” Willa said. Elijah looked up in surprise.

“What?” she said. “Now is the *exact* right time to cuss.”

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE



Rita clung to the metal ladder, listening as the footfalls of the professors faded back down the tunnel. She exhaled long, in an attempt to slow her heart. Each of them was good. Smart. Strong. Gifted. But together, they were downright dangerous. She knew that only her experience had allowed her to escape for a second time. But she had not won the day.

And they were nothing compared to the soldier now issuing threats.

Letting go of the rails, she dropped back down into her lair, landing in a crouch. With instincts still on high alert, her rational mind tried to convince herself that she was safe. As her body relaxed, Rita's mind went full-throttle. Considering their words about Chem in danger, she mulled over what he had done for her, and the project that they had toiled on together. A slight smile curled on her face as she thought about him struggling to move their frozen cadavers down the steps of the vacant diner. Each one was a symbol of their failure—of hopes frozen forever. An emotion she barely remembered crept over her like a shadow at dusk.

Guilt.

Conviction.

“Bullshit,” she hissed as she fought the feelings.

Chem would have just as soon killed her as helped her if it weren't for the damning files she had gathered. He said it himself. He wasn't in it for her or the professors. The truth of the matter was that the only person Percival Scott cared about, was Percival Scott... and maybe that woman lying in a hospital bed across town.

As her mind worked over Chem's treatment of her, she only grew angrier. Damn him and his feigned sympathy. Screw his empathy. He didn't know her. Didn't care. And there was no way he'd risk his neck to save her if the tables were turned.

As quickly as her rage focused on Chem, it turned back on herself. Rita cursed her human weakness and her willingness to become vulnerable. She turned and glared at the art on the wall of her cave, at the work of her hands. Rita started to tremble, taking in her *pièce de résistance*—beautiful by any standard—and she hated it. Hated all that

it stood for, all the possibilities that would never be.

Hope turned to anger—anger to rage.

Without thinking, Rita grabbed two spray cans from her plastic box at the base of the wall. A scream of indignation erupted from her throat. As one possessed, she defaced her work of art. Spraying darkness in every direction, it took seconds to destroy the beauty that had taken months to create.

The cans rattled as she dropped them to muddy floor: empty guns from the hands of a killer.

Tearless sobs echoed in her lair.

She crouched, like the monster she was. With her ass between her haunches and her head buried in her arms, her cries turned to shrieks, shrieks to laughter.

It felt good to destroy something so beautiful—especially something of her own making.

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO



“What the hell do we do?”

Elijah stopped his pacing long enough to look at the clock above the kitchen sink. It was off by an hour—it had never been changed since daylight-savings time. He exhaled long and hard. His brain ached. In the library archives, anything was possible, given enough time and energy. Elijah had perfected the craft of research. Now, it seemed, they were facing several options, and all of them were deadly.

“I don’t know,” Willa answered. “Rita seemed pretty freaked.”

“And you trust her?” he asked. Willa had remained silent about their encounter on the long walk home. When her thoughts ran deep, her mouth grew quiet. Elijah, on the other hand, was still pissed about how The Creature had attacked them and ran. His grumbling filled the void between them. He had already washed his hands three times, trying to get the river smell off.

“Yes,” she said. “At least, I trust her fear. This guy that has Chem, we don’t know anything about him except for the fact that he’s tough as nails and nearly beat The Creature on his own. If he was able to handle Rita, then I’m down right terrified of him. And he’s got the home-field advantage. Literally. Stealth is impossible. We’re walking into something awful, and, honestly, I’m not sure we’ve got the fire power to handle this.”

She was right. Chem had gotten himself in way too deep, and now they had no way to bail him out.

“Bastard,” Elijah mumbled.

Willa nodded in agreement and then shook her head. “It’s not just him. If Rizzo really is behind this, then maybe we share some of the blame. Chem warned us not to go digging around. And we didn’t listen.”

Elijah stopped pacing and sank into a chair. Chem said that Elijah was no hero, and maybe he was right. Between Rizzo and the mystery man, the professors were playing the varsity squad, and they could barely toss a ball.

Willa’s phone buzzed, and she reached for it. “It’s Crane. Says he wants to meet with me.”

“I don’t really think now’s the right time, Will. We need to focus.”

“Maybe now’s the perfect time. We’re out of our depth here. Crane can probably give us some advice. Something.”

“Will...” Elijah sighed. But Willa wasn’t listening. She was already on her feet.

“What else are we going to do, Elijah? There are too many questions. I’m going to talk to the one person who can give me answers.”

And like that, she was out the door, leaving Elijah alone with a bloody knife in his hand and not a clue what to do. No matter what, he couldn’t abandon Chem. Liar or not, Chem was a good guy and one of the few friends Elijah had. There was some piece of Elijah that hoped for another explanation, that wanted to believe his friend. Which meant that a fight was nearly inevitable.

If push came to shove, Elijah would trust that his powers could give him the bigger shove.

But that might not be enough this time.

He looked down at the blade, trying to place the strange Latin text over the symbol of the bow and arrows. It looked familiar somehow. Like something out of an ancient legend.

He glanced at the clock again, then grabbed his coat and headed toward the door.

Elijah didn’t know how to save Chem, but he knew he could solve one part of the puzzle, and it wasn’t by playing hero.

This was a job for an academic.

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE



Crane refused to talk until Willa accepted tea. She agreed, hoping to expedite the conversation. A poor calculation, as it turned out. Crane's teetering around in the kitchen went on for what felt like hours. Finally, he emerged with two steaming cups in hand. Willa took hers with a smile. It was weak, and she placed it to the side.

"As I was saying," she started as he settled into the overstuffed chair, "it looks like we poked the bear with Rizzo. He's retaliated, kidnapping our friend. If we can't save him by midnight..."

"I *am* sorry," Crane said. "That sounds horrible. I told you Rizzo was as low as they come. But that's not why I called you here."

"But..."

"Listen, I'm sure your friends can take care of themselves. There is something far more pressing. I have news on your large bald man."

Suddenly thoughts of Chem and Rizzo disappeared. Willa leaned forward, ready to pounce.

"Tell me."

Crane smiled. "After you told me about this scoundrel Rex, I couldn't help but take the liberty of contacting some of my old compatriots. His description certainly piqued their interest—especially when they learned of his involvement in Edwin's death—and they said they'd do some digging. There's a man with that exact description currently in Lawrenceville. But there's no telling how long he'll be there. If you wanted to confront him, I wouldn't delay."

She didn't. Willa was out the door as soon as she could get the address. She shouted thanks over her shoulder than raced down the steps.

Dark clouds blocked out any semblance of moonlight, but she could see multicolored lights pouring out of the boarded-up windows of the club. A large bearded man stood by the door.

Willa crept from the shadows and made a beeline for the entrance. The man held up a hand in her direction.

"Sorry, babe, private event. Unless you trade your ratty old sweats

in for a short skirt with a low neck, we've got no room for you."

A half dozen spells ran through her mind, but she decided that this goon deserved a more personal touch. Without breaking stride, she grabbed his arm and twisted—a Muay Thai move she hadn't had the chance to try out yet. His grin turned into a grimace, and he dropped to his knees where Willa continued the assault with a quick elbow to the forehead.

She left him bleeding on the sidewalk and pushed the door open.

This was the chance she had been waiting for. A chance to learn the truth about what happened that night at PPG Tower. She wasn't going to let anything get in her way.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR



Elijah bypassed the rows and rows of books, instead favoring the computer lab. He didn't have time to enjoy the texture of pages flipping through his hand. He had work to do.

Googling bow and arrow symbols sent him down a rabbit hole, but the Latin phrase on the blade of the knife drew a hit immediately on some sort of basement brand political blog called *The Keystone Voice*.

***Ferocia Fatum Fugant*, the fearless send fate flying, is the official motto of the equally arrogant Blackbow mercenary group. Their movements are unknown, their methods uncivilized, but the source of their money is clear—the US Government. Peacekeeping organizations have reported numerous human rights violations at the hand of these killers for hire across the globe, including Syria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Venezuela, and even Russia. Blackbow long maintains its secrecy, but when asked about mercenaries on the US payroll, a spokesperson for the DOJ claimed that: “All private contractors employed by the United States uphold the highest standards of honor and diligence in keeping with American military standards.”**

The article continued, listing the numerous, albeit unsubstantiated claims of Blackbow's involvement in violence worldwide, including its history of hiring men and women who were discharged from the military. But Elijah heard enough.

Rita wasn't lying. If one of these mercenaries had taken Chem, then he was as good as dead—unless they saved him.

Elijah glanced at his phone. Less than thirty minutes until the deadline. He sent Willa a desperate text, then left the library.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE



The setting sun lit up the buildings on the Northshore with reds and oranges as the pickup truck rolled west. Chem's eyes scanned the sidewalks, watching the evening crowds start to gather for dinner and drinks. He gave a few of them smiles and nods at a stoplight and considered signaling to them by raising his hands up to full view. Maybe a black guy with cable-tied wrists riding shotgun with some country boy might raise a few brows and warrant a call to law enforcement.

But the guy at the wheel was good, and Chem knew it. Any alert for help might just end with his body floating down the Ohio River before the boys in blue had a chance to show up.

"Nice night," Chem finally said. "Haven't seen the Buccos play this season yet. You?"

The man's eyes were on the road. He had been silent since they had left the old, abandoned warehouse. Chem could be wrong, but he could swear that the guy was second guessing his next move, whatever the hell it was.

Passing PNC Park, the truck stayed its course, cutting the distance between parking lots that led toward Heinz Field, Pittsburgh's football stadium, and the place of Sunday worship for many of the regions' faithful. The truck slowed as they approached, and they took a right turn. The man was careful to use his directionals.

"We gonna throw around a few balls?" Chem asked as they slowed at a service access point in the chain-link perimeter on the backside of the field.

The man finally turned toward him. "Keep your mouth shut. This isn't about you. If you behave, there's no reason why you can't get out of this in one piece." He drummed the steering wheel with his thumbs and craned his neck to inspect the area. "Do anything stupid, and I *will* turn on you." The man's glare cut right through Chem, and a chill ran through him.

This guy was a badass, and Chem knew his threats were anything but hollow. He nodded in response and faced forward, as a man with a receding hairline in Dickies maintenance apparel unlocked the gate and rolled it open. The truck ambled in, pulling to a stop next to him.

"Hey, Vinny," the man said.

"What's up, bro?" He leaned on the truck's window and glanced in toward Chem. With a quick glance down at Chem's hands, he gave the prisoner a nod. This guy wasn't calling anyone.

"We all clear?" the driver asked.

"Yeah. Gave maintenance the night off. We have some big ass concert next week. Pop diva girl or some shit. But the crew won't be loading in for days. This time of year, there's no reason for anyone else being around. Stadium's all yours."

"Means a lot, Vinny."

The man in the Dickies laughed. "You bet your ass it does. You owe me one. A big one. And whatever the hell you're doing in there," he glanced at Chem again, "either one of you, I don't want to know anything about it. Already punched my sorry ass out for the night, so as far as the boss man knows, I'm out pounding cold ones with the boys right now."

After a quick fist bump, the man put the truck into first and rolled toward the stadium, which loomed over them like a behemoth.

"It's not too late to end this," Chem said. "You can let me go."

"No can do."

"Why? Because Rizzo told you? He's the real monster here man, not Rita. Not Elijah or Willa. You seem like an okay guy—when you don't have a knife in my face."

Pulling to a stop next to an access door, he turned and faced Chem.

"I'll do whatever it takes to keep this city safe."

Chem shook his head. "Take it from me man, 'whatever it takes' can take you to some real dark places. What if you're the one putting the city in danger?"

"Grab a seat," the man grunted as he and Chem stepped out onto the edge of the field.

Even the tension of the situation couldn't keep Chem from taking in the grandeur of the stadium from this vantage point. The complex rose up in every direction in all of its black and gold majesty. But what really threw him, was that the damn place was as quiet as a church on a Monday morning. Stepping onto grass, he could feel yesterday's rain squish beneath his shoes. The summer had been as hot as hell, and he could almost hear the soil sigh in relief.

Chem grabbed a seat on the steel bench. He held his hands up, offering them to his captor. "Any chance I can get these off?"

"I was thinking the same thing."

Chem exhaled. "Thanks, man. I promise to behave."

The brute cut the cable ties with his pocket knife and then nodded toward the rail connecting the parts of the bench.

"Oh, come on," Chem laughed. "I was just getting comfortable."

“Good. You can get comfortable on the bench. In fact, why don’t you get real comfortable. And take your boots off.”

“Fuck you.”

The man smiled. “Fool me twice...”

Chem pulled his boots off and dropped them on the grass. Then the soldier picked them up and tossed them into the stands.

With his left hand strapped in to the rail, Chem watched the man stride off toward the middle of the field with two black duffle bags, one on each shoulder. His arms strained under the weight. Otherwise, he walked with ease. Whoever the mystery man was, Chem could clearly see that he was a specimen like none he had ever encountered. Certainly a soldier, and a man with certain unbending principles. Sadly, Chem now stood opposed to that resolve. He imagined there were fields full of dead bodies who had done the same.

Twilight had turned to darkness as Chem watched the man dropping to a knee in the middle of the field under the auxiliary lights. In the dim glow, he could make out the man unloading his equipment. Chem couldn’t be sure what kind of goodies he brought along, but he didn’t want to be the dipshit that this guy was prepping for.

After about an hour, Chem’s back began to stiffen, and he started to wonder if all of this was some sort of cruel and unusual prank of the highest degree. Just as he started to plot his revenge on whatever jackass had plotted this whole thing, the man jogged into sight.

He slid his knife through the cable tie and released Chem. Grabbing a folding chair, he nodded out toward the middle of the field. “Let’s go. Time for the main event.”

“I ain’t singing “The Star-Spangled Banner,” if that’s what you mean.”

The man ignored him. And gave him a light shove on the back. When they reached mid-field, Chem’s new frenemy open the chair. Chem sat, and dropped his wrists down by his side, waiting to be cuffed again.

“Sorry,” the man sighed as he zipped Chem into the chair.

“You get those things in bulk at some soldier of fortune warehouse, or what?”

He looked up at Chem and grinned. “It’s like you said. I mostly buy them to hold my damned truck together.”

Chem couldn’t help but laugh at that. “Now that’s good. Sounds like my first ride. ‘88 Buick.”

Nodding, the man asked, “Century?”

“No way. LeSabre. Wagon.”

The man’s eyes travelled around the perimeter of the field. “Woody?”

"You bet your ass it was. I only rode in style."

"Yeah," the man laughed. "Bet the ladies just swooned."

"My mom said it would keep me pure. But there's a lot of room in the back of that thing," Chem said.

"Didn't think I'd be riding a piece of shit at this age."

Chem nodded. "Yeah. Only thing I ride these days is the bus. I'd take the old shaggin' wagon back in a second if I could." He watched the man watch the stadium. Something was brewing, and Chem knew it wouldn't be long before he figured out what role he played in this game. He had made more than one enemy over the years, but his friends were few and far between. If the man had been honest with him, Chem wouldn't be alone long.

"Look, since you're fixing for a fight here, there's something you need to know."

"Quiet," the man said.

"No, I'm serious. You need some better intel before the good the bad and the ugly show up."

"I thought I was the cowboy?"

"Yeah," Chem said. "That was before you decided to use me as bait to catch my friends."

"I'm just doing my duty."

"Bullshit. Whatever duty calls for, it can't be taking down Elijah and Willa. I'm the monster, not them. Your fight should end with me."

"And you're pet?"

"Already told you, her name is Rita and she's the victim here, not the villain."

"That's enough."

"Nah, man. It ain't nearly enough. She's just some woman. An innocent. Yeah, she's missing some bedside manner, but Rita's doing the best she can, just like all of us."

"Tell that to the men she murdered."

Chem knew how frivolous his words were, but he had to take one more shot at talking him down. "A couple of years ago, her life was perfect. Young love. New life. Blossoming artist. All that TV shit. She had it all together."

"I said, 'be quiet.'"

"Yeah. You did. But if you're going head first into this, I'm not going to let you do it in ignorance. She had an accident. Hell of an accident. I'm just been trying to help her man. Help her get back to normal."

"I'll get your medal once we're done here."

"Screw you. There's no honor in this. Untie me. Let's find Rita. Let's get the professors. I'll show you how wrong you are. We're way better company than Rizzo."

The man spun and looked Chem in the eyes. His eyes were ice cold, but Chem only guessed they were like that by training. His words were having some effect. "I don't give a shit about you or your friends. And for the record, I don't care about Rizzo either. I'm doing this to protect my own. Once this last thing is done, I'll never have to see you or him ever again."

"There's never one last thing with guys like Rizzo. You're in his pocket now, and you'll never leave it."

The right side of the man's mouth turned up, and Chem couldn't be sure if it was a smile or a sneer. They sat like that for what felt like an hour. He finally replied, "You're probably right. But this still has to be done."

"Spoken like a true hero."

A door slammed off in the distance. The soldier's face was grim. "Hang tight. Time to go to work."

The man sealed Chem's mouth with a stretch of duct tape then sprinted for the sideline.

CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX



Flashing lights and deep bass gave Willa a migraine. She wasn't much older than the people in the club, but she left like she could be their grandmother. Maybe Chem's jokes were spot on. Maybe she did spend too much time at home with her cat. Then a drunk dude with frosted tips stumbled into her. Chem was wrong. Her cat rocked compared to these assholes.

Willa looked around the room, trying hard not to judge the writhing bodies. She failed.

She wondered at their lives. Ever since Willa first used magic, her path diverged from her peers. Free time disappeared to hours of intense concentration, pouring over the words and the movements that would bring her power into being. Since the events at PPG Place, she had spent hours training her body, preparing it to be used as a weapon. And she spent just as many hours grieving over those she couldn't save.

And tonight, that divergence brought her here, not to dance, not to enjoy an evening with friends, not to let the cares of her world slip away. She came here with a singular purpose—to confront the man who killed her student and altered her life.

Willa worked her way into a corner in an upper balcony, overlooking the dance floor. She was shielded enough should security come looking for her.

She played out in her head what would happen when she saw Rex, but truthfully, she had no idea what the confrontation might look like, or if she was strong enough to take him down without using rogue magic.

It was worth more than a migraine to find out.

As the minutes slipped by with no sign of a giant bald killer, Willa resigned herself to another missed chance. She couldn't wait around here forever. She knew Elijah too well. Nothing would keep the historian from going to rescue Chem. Whether he believed it or not, he was a man of courage, and he would act on his convictions.

And if she wasn't there, both of those idiots were likely to get themselves killed.

Almost on cue, her phone buzzed. She didn't need to look at it to

know what it was—an urgent message from the historian. She moved toward the door, phone in hand. It was there, pushing through the dance floor that she saw him. His bald head weaving above the crowd like a shark's fin cutting through water. It was unmistakable this time. Words of power jumped to her lips, and she turned toward him. Bodies kept blocking her way, and Willa elbowed past them, never losing sight of her goal.

The phone buzzed again, but she barely felt it. Her mind had a singular focus.

Rex moved quickly, as if the sea of dancers were nothing to him but fog. He reached his destination before Willa reached him—a guarded door near the back of the club. Two men stood shoulder to shoulder—men who looked like they knew what they were doing. She calculated her odds and moved forward anyway. There was no telling when she'd get another chance like this.

The phone buzzed again, and Willa looked at it without thinking. Elijah's name shone out from the screen. The word **URGENT** was all she could read of the message.

She looked toward the exit, then back to the darkened room. She thought of what Crane had said, about not pulling her punches, about letting her friends handle themselves.

She slipped the phone into her pocket and moved.

CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN



Elijah paced in front of the large football stadium. It looked to his untrained eye less like a sports complex, and more like a spacecraft landing pad.

He could spend a lifetime in Pittsburgh and never understand it's fascination with sports. On game day, this stretch of the river would be teeming with fans, who poured in by bike, bus, and even boat to watch the Steelers play. But tonight, Pittsburgh sat eerily quiet. He prayed that it would stay that way.

It was madness to come here—Elijah couldn't deny that. By all accounts, this was the most experienced foe that he'd ever faced. The soldier inside had who knows how long to prepare for this encounter. The advantage sat clearly in the all-too able hands of the home team.

But Elijah couldn't stop now. All hope of peace died in the library. This would come to a fight, and Elijah was willing to go down swinging. He just hated that he would be fighting alone. Rita had gone dark, after making it abundantly clear that whatever relationship she had with Chem wasn't worth going up against the soldier. And Willa...

Elijah didn't know what to make of Willa. She was off battling her own demons and refused to answer his calls.

"Dammit, Will," he muttered under his breath.

"Don't damn me yet," a voice echoed from behind him.

Elijah jumped, but then his fright turned to joy. "You came."

"I'd never miss your big game," Willa said with a smile. "Think the coach will actually put you in this time, or are you just here for the orange slices?"

"Unfortunately, I've tapped out all of my sports puns," Elijah replied. "And what's worse, I just got out of the library. This guy is no joke. Paramilitary. Definitely a step up from Rizzo's other goons. Did Crane give you anything useful?"

Willa thought for a second, then shook her head. "Nothing that we need to go in there." She nodded at the stadium. "But remember, hotshot, we're no joke either. Let's go show him what a couple academic freaks are made of."

Elijah's smile widened. For the first time tonight, he realized they had a chance. "Let's go save our friend."

CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT



All that Rita knew about science had been learned in her tenth-grade class with Mrs. McMillan. It wasn't much. She liked the old bird well enough but never thought she needed any of that stuff. It didn't capture her imagination.

Art was her passion from as early on as she could remember, and she pursued it relentlessly every day of her life, until the accident. So, as she stood outside of the door to the abandoned diner, she had no idea what she might be looking for. A vile of a mystery fluid. Some specimen carelessly cast aside. It didn't matter. If she could find something left behind by Chem, something that another scientist in another city might be able to use, she would take it and guard it with her life. The possibility of a head start on a cure was worth the layover before heading out of town.

She had already stopped by the scientist's basement lab. She grabbed his medical go bag and a few of his notebooks, but she needed something more, which had led her back to this den of horrors.

Holding her breath, she pushed the door open. Its familiar quiet squeak sounded more like the shriek of a banshee to her ears in the quiet night. She paused to listen, but more importantly she drew in a long draught of air, trying to determine whether or not the scientist's mobile lab was occupied by anyone—or anything.

Immediately she sensed that something was off. Her brain registered some foreign scent. Something not quite human. The air stank with life gone bad, as if someone had left food out to spoil and half-assed the clean-up. Rita convinced herself that it was some remnant from the business that had occupied the place before Chem had found it.

As she stood in the cold dusty silence, her eyes wandered around the room. It was impossible to be there and not to think of the chemist. Over the past few weeks, they had performed their experiments there. Test after test. Rita would catch the subjects, Chem would mix his serum, and they would both deal with the aftereffects. A row of frozen soldiers in the basement were a testament to their failures

Neither of them worked out of any sort of altruism. Chem was trying to keep the damning materials that Rita was using to blackmail him under wraps. And she just wanted to be wholly human again. Their bond was wed from necessity. Nevertheless, by the end of their time together, she almost felt as if they were partners.

A team.

A twinge of guilt hit her gut. She pictured the soldier she had fought in the alley and recalled his strength and skills. For all she knew, Chem could be a dead man already. But that wasn't her problem. At least that's what she kept telling herself. His friends, the professors, would try to free him, she knew that at least. And, if they got lucky, they might just make it out of there alive. But only one life concerned Rita at the moment—her own.

Clearly, Chem had removed everything from the place. He was a cautious man. Ordered. Scientific. There wasn't a chance that he would leave anything useful behind. But nevertheless, she searched every square inch of the back room where they worked. Nearing the stairs that led into the basement, the alien smell grew stronger. It hung in her nose and tickled the back of her throat. Her animal mind raced like a supercomputer, trying to match the scent with something she had experienced prior to that night. She caught her breath when she noticed that the door leading down into the darkness was ajar, and a clamoring of footprints marked the path out of the cellar.

"The hell is this?" she whispered to herself.

She thought of the bodies, the men that had met their demise all for the sake of science. She wondered if their bodies in the freezer below had been found. If some kids, or perhaps some urban indigents, had broken into the restaurant and found her and Chem's secret stash of frozen assholes. For a second, she feared Pittsburgh's finest arriving and taking her into custody. But she shook it away. Even a few good cops were no match for her, and she had to know.

The stairs let out a tired yawn as she made her way down into damp basement. Cool air enveloped her, a momentary easement of the summer's heat on her scaled hide. But it brought her no comfort. Something had happened here, and the further she descended, the more ominous it felt.

Turning the corner of the steps, her worst fear became a reality. Yellow light stretched across the room from the open door of the walk-in freezer, she and Chem's holding tank for their failed experiments. She crept across the room, and, pulling the door open, saw nothing.

The bodies were missing.

At first, her concern of a break-in was confirmed, but then something all the more terrifying hit her. Instead of drag marks

coming out of the freezer, she saw only perfect footprints on the dust-coated floor.

All of them exiting the freezer.

PART THREE



Let us go then, you and I, When the evening is spread out against the
sky Like a patient etherized upon a table; Let us go, through certain
half-deserted streets, The muttering retreats

Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels And sawdust
restaurants with oyster-shells: Streets that follow like a tedious
argument Of insidious intent

To lead you to an overwhelming question....

Oh, do not ask, "What is it?"

Let us go and make our visit.

from "The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock," T. S. Eliot

CHAPTER FIFTY-NINE



The stadium was pitch black, but Elijah could see a lone figure sitting on the Steelers' logo at the fifty-yard line.

Even in the darkness, Elijah could tell it was Chem.

Willa followed behind him as he advanced toward the field, her eyes on the stands. No sign of the soldier.

Since they were showing up empty handed, they figured an open approach would be safest. Their only hope was to negotiate—play on this guy's humanity. And if that failed...Elijah and Willa could do a lot with empty hands.

Elijah stepped onto the meticulously manicured lawn—Kentucky Bluegrass. Elijah looked up everything he could about the stadium before showing up. He had no clue how to use that particular bit of intel, but he figured that if he died here tonight, it would be nice to know what he was bleeding out on.

The way Chem was moving in the chair, quick jerks from side to side, Elijah figured he was tied up. But he wasn't talking, which meant a gag.

Elijah turned to Willa, and she nodded. Nowhere to go but forward.

Ten yards from the chemist and a voice sounded from over the PA system.

"Where's The Creature?"

Elijah tried to find the source, but they were alone. He took a breath. A lot rode on this.

"*Her* name is Rita. And since you've already met, you probably know she's not the 'come along quietly' type."

A long pause, then, "The deal was all three of you for the chemist's life. You must not value it that much."

The threat in those words was clear. Elijah looked to Willa, then to Chem.

Willa cleared her throat. "We don't have her, but there's no need for violence. Let's just talk—" Willa let out a sharp gasp.

Elijah turned, and the first thing he saw was the knife on her throat. Then he saw the figure holding it.

"Don't do this," Willa said through gritted teeth, but the man

pressed the knife with careful pressure.

"If you open your mouth again," the man said, his voice like gravel, "better make those words count. They'll be your last."

Rage and fear wrestled for control of Elijah's mind. "If you hurt her —"

"Save your threats. I know your mettle, historian, and it doesn't pass muster. The deal was you freaks for the mad scientist. You're monsters. And a danger to this city. You failed your end, but I won't. After we're done here, I'll find her. But I see no reason why I shouldn't keep my end of the deal." He moved the knife from Willa's throat and pointed it toward Chem.

Elijah's eyes darted from the man to Chem to Willa. He could read the panic on her face, but also the commitment. There was only one play left.

Elijah reached into his tweed jacket and pulled out a manilla envelope.

"Fine. You know who I am, but I know something about you, too, Sergeant Tim Ford."

The man stiffened at his name.

"Two tours with the Marines. You were a good soldier. High marks, high praise. And then you joined Blackbow, fucking mercenaries. Loyal to nothing and no one but the highest bidder. What's the matter? Not enough for you to kill innocent people overseas, you had to come back and do it here."

"You need better research," the man growled. "I'm doing this to save lives."

Elijah took a step forward. "Yeah, how long have you been telling yourself that? How many more people do you have to kill to save lives?"

"You take one step closer and you'll find out."

"I've seen you before, you know that? I was there at your welcome home party. Hometown hero, Tim Ford. Those people know what their hero is up to tonight?"

"I never said—" The man paused. "I'm no hero."

"Well, on that point we can agree." As Elijah spat the last word, he threw the folder down. Pictures of burned villages and rubble filled cities scattered across the grass. Ford couldn't help but look. Which is when Willa made her move.

CHAPTER SIXTY



Willa grabbed the soldier's knife hand and leaned forward, a Muay Thai move designed to send him over her shoulder.

It didn't quite work out like she saw it in the video.

The moment of distraction Elijah bought them disappeared just as quickly as it had come. Ford planted his feet, and she wasn't strong enough to complete the throw. He gripped Willa harder and pulled her in close. So, she changed tactics.

She whipped her head back and felt something crunch. It was a move she had seen Rita pull off with cartilage-crushing effect. His arm weakened, and she spun out of his grasp, her hands still trying to hold the knife out of the way.

But it couldn't last.

Ford ignored his crushed nose, and with his free hand he grabbed one of Willa's wrists. He twisted, and the pain was too much for her to bear. She fell to a knee, her grip slipping from the knife.

Before he could strike, a roar of thunder broke through the night sky, echoing around the stadium. Along with it came a flaming cannonball, which crashed into the soldier's chest and sent him tumbling.

Elijah moved fast, pressing his advantage, but the man gained his feet as if nothing happened.

He must be wearing some sort of vest, Willa thought as she watched him fight. The speed at which he dodged Elijah's fists—it was like The Foundry was fighting through molasses.

He couldn't be out fought, but Willa had power that few had experienced. She raised her voice.

"I took my power in my hand—"

But before the spell could take effect, the field changed. Ford spun low, his leg sweeping outward, and like a top-heavy building Elijah came crashing to the ground. In one smooth move, Ford threw a small metal object toward Willa.

Willa turned in a feeble attempt to shield herself from the grenade's explosion, but the blast never came. Instead, heavy white smoke filled the air.

"What—" Willa tried to speak, but the gas clawed its way down

her throat. Her eyes watered as her body shook with coughing. There would be no magic until her lungs cleared.

She watched helplessly through the smoke as Elijah reengaged Ford in battle. The historian's strength sustained him, but it was clear he was outmatched. And without her spells to back them up, there was little Willa could do.

So she focused on what they came here for. She ran for Chem and pulled the tape from his mouth.

"Fucking morons," he coughed. "It's nice to see you."

Willa smiled. "Same," Willa managed to wheeze.

"Now get me out of here, and I think I can get you your mojo back. Then we're only half screwed."

CHAPTER SIXTY-ONE



Ford could barely hear himself think over the voices in his head. He came into this night so confident he was doing the right thing. But the more Chem talked, the more Tim doubted. And seeing the professors up close, it was hard to see that they were the threats Rizzo claimed them to be.

All that changed when the historian showed his true colors.

Branton was like nothing Ford had ever seen. He thought back to the name he heard in the tabloids—The Foundry. For once he couldn't deny them their accuracy. It was like fighting the steel mill in Ford's old neighborhood. At the sight of him, all of Ford's doubts were drowned out by the drums of war beating in his mind. This was his element now.

Man versus monster.

Rizzo's intel provided the first line of defense. Without it, Ford would have been cooked rather than only singed. Luckily for him, The Foundry didn't know how to use his prodigious strength. Ford could still feel the one good blow The Foundry had landed. If he hadn't been wearing heavy-duty body armor, the fist would have caved his chest in. Even as it stood, he would be covered in bruises come morning, and he was pretty sure there would be a cracked rib or two.

But Ford knew how to ignore pain.

Dodging the molten fists was one thing—but returning damage was another. Ford had long since abandoned his knife. One good stab to The Foundry's chest left the blade a twisted, wilted mess. Which gave him only his fists.

He circled The Foundry like a boxer, taking open shots to historian's sides. He didn't know how strong the thing was, but the exposed flesh gave him confidence that with enough damage he could wear the thing down—as long as he didn't take another direct hit.

He stepped back, avoiding The Foundry's reach, and almost lost his footing as he tripped over something protruding from the grass.

"The hell?" he yelled. The feeling of moisture and the spray of water answered his question. Sprinklers rose from the ground, covering the field with water. Ford turned to see Chem emerging from a maintenance box.

Clever bastard.

Ford rolled out of the way of the steaming Foundry, then kicked at his ankle. The academic had no sense of body awareness, and Ford's boot nearly snapped his leg. But instead of finishing the fight then and there, he gained his feet and sprinted back toward the center of the field. With the sprinklers running, he had maybe a minute before the gas cleared and the poet found her voice.

"We are not now that strength which in old days

Moved earth and heaven..."

Damn. Less than a minute.

Willa stood firm, facing down his charge with her arms held out in front of her.

The poem grabbed at his chest and legs. He felt like he weighed a thousand pounds, and he could tell by the look on her face that she was ramping it up. He imagined his body crushed beneath the weight of those words. He had to move fast.

He pushed himself through her spell and let his momentum carry him into her. They tumbled onto the grass. As soon as her words stopped, he felt relief. She never finished her spell. Within seconds he'd be back to normal.

But she had more than magic tricks up her sleeve. She came at him, and he could sense the practice behind her moves. He was impressed, but now they were playing his game.

He blocked her elbow and was prepared for the knee she tried to follow through with. While she swung, words jumped back to her lips.

Ford never gave them a chance to grow.

He landed an open palm to her solar plexus and she crumpled, windless.

"Bastard!" a voice cracked behind him.

Ford turned in time to catch the metal wrench that Chem was swinging at him. He easily disarmed the scientist and threw him to the ground.

"I told you," Ford said. "I'm here to do a job." He looked at the wrench, now in his hand, and then back down at the chemist. "Did you think you could stop me with this?" He raised it high, threatening to cave the man's skull in.

But instead of cowering in fear, Chem smiled up at him. "Nope. But I knew I could distract you until my lab partner showed up."

"Lab partn—" Ford spun, but not quickly enough. A scaly foot the size of a dinner plate crashed into his head.

He followed the momentum with a roll and came up with the wrench held in front of him defensively. As stars cleared from his vision, he saw the pale demon face of the freak.

"So," he said. "I hear you have a name. Well, *Rita*, it's about

freaking time you showed up. It's your party after all."

She crouched low and hissed. "As you can imagine, I don't get invited out much. Is it rude if I rip my hosts' spleen out with my teeth?"

Ford's stomach turned. Despite the iron in his veins and the years of facing danger, he couldn't help but be afraid of this thing.

She was death incarnate.

He stood and patted the wrench in his hand. "It's only rude if you don't try." Then he braced himself for her attack.

CHAPTER SIXTY-TWO



Chem ran to check on Willa, but she waved him off.

"I'm fine," she grunted.

"Some friends you got," Elijah's voice rang out behind him.

Chem turned to see him limping toward them. His metal had sloughed off, and Chem couldn't help but give a thought to the poor grounds keeper who was going to have to deal with a puddle of cold steel near the end zone.

"I'll say," Chem replied. "You guys sure took your time getting here."

"I meant the WWE rejects duking it out over there."

Chem followed Elijah's stare. It was almost a thing of beauty watching the two of them fight.

"You think she can handle him?" Willa asked.

"It sure looks like it," Elijah said.

Chem couldn't disagree. While Ford's strength and precision was unfaltering, Rita's speed and wild fury couldn't be outmatched. With each slash and whirl, Rita looked closer and closer to finishing this thing.

But something was off. Chem watched them move, struggling to place it.

"I don't know," he said. "Something doesn't feel right."

"It's his face," Willa whispered. "He doesn't look like a man about to lose a fight to her."

Willa was right. Ford held all the composure of a world-series poker player, despite the fact that Rita's claws were dripping in his blood.

And then, before any of them could react, Ford made his move.

Rita maneuvered a slash with her claws into a spin, but as she came around, Ford threw a handful of gray dust in her face. Temporarily blinded, she didn't see the new weapon he pulled from his vest.

"Rita!" Chem shouted, but it was too late.

With some kind of makeshift bolas, a long string with a small weights dangling on the ends, Ford snagged Rita's hand. He pulled the loop tight as she tried to slip away. Then with a flick of his wrist, Ford

lassoed her feet together.

In seconds, Rita was hogtied and struggling on the ground.

Ford leaned on her with his knee and pulled a pistol from his back. He placed the muzzle to her head.

"Any one of you move, and I finish her," he said, panting.

Willa and Elijah were speechless, but Chem got to his feet.

"You don't have to do this."

"I have no choice," he said. "You know what she is, better than anyone. She's a monster. And you heard your friends' report, so now you know that I'm nothing more than a monster too. And this is what a monster does."

"Bullshit," Chem shouted. He took a step forward. "She might not be a looker, but she's human same as you, same as me. We've all done shitty things, but that doesn't have to define you. You can be more."

"I have to do this. I have to protect the city. I have to protect *him*," Ford shouted.

"We both know who's the real threat to this city, and it isn't her."

"I—" But whatever Ford was going to say, he never got the chance. Light flooded the stadium and the sound of a slow clap struck Chem's ears. He turned and looked at the middle-aged man in a suit walking toward them, a half dozen men in tow.

"Well, well, well, that was some performance," he said. "Better than any halftime show I've seen."

"Who the fuck?" Chem started, but Willa was on her feet now.

"Rizzo," she said.

"Oh," Chem said. "Shit."

CHAPTER SIXTY-THREE



“You did it, son. You actually did it.”

Ford rose to his feet, but kept the gun pointed at Rita, as he watched the new situation unfold. He was equipped to fight a wizard, a human shark, and a walking volcano—but he wasn’t prepared for the appearance of the mob. New variables always meant new risks. Something wasn’t right here.

This wasn’t the plan.

At least, it wasn’t Ford’s plan. Rizzo seemed like a man watching life unfold the way he wanted. Two of his men split off to cover the nerd squad. The others flanked him as he marched up to Ford. The gangster’s greedy eyes never left Rita’s body.

Under the bright lights of the stadium, Ford could see her clearly for the first time. She was hideous, like a creature from some drunken sailor’s nightmare. And yet, the human form underneath of all those scales was clear. Whatever happened to bring her to this point, she once walked the world as a woman.

But people change. Ford was proof of that.

“I told you I would,” he said to the boss.

“You are the real deal, my boy. And you’ve proven that you’re one of us now. Together, just think of what we can do to this city.”

“Don’t you mean *for* this city?” Ford asked.

Rizzo smiled. “Of course. *For* this city. Most people don’t understand this, but greatness requires a firm hand. We can provide that firm hand, Ford. You and me. You’re like the son I wish I had. We’re cut from the same cloth.”

Ford watched Rizzo’s kid squirm at that, but he stayed silent.

“What will you do with them?” Ford asked.

“The professors know too much. Maybe if we can convince them to keep their mouths shut...”

“Fuck you.” The historian’s shout was muffled by a thug’s fist.

“As I thought,” Rizzo said. “It’s for the best. They attacked me in my home. I can’t let that stand. As for the chemist...it turns out he’s more useful than I first imagined. I think we’ll keep him around. I’ve learned he’s working on some sort of enhancement. That’s something I could desperately use.”

“But,” Ford said, “you said this was about taking freaks off of the streets.”

“Exactly. But just think of how effective we could be with power like his on our side? We could rule this town. This one however...” He kicked Rita, who didn’t make a sound. “It’s too wild of a thing to be controlled. Too far gone. I think the humane thing to do would be to put it down.”

Rizzo looked up at Ford, expectantly.

“Now?” Ford asked.

“No time like the present, son. By morning her ugly mug will be on every newsstand from here to the end of the world.”

Ford kept his eyes down. She was staring back up at him. Not anger, nor pain, not even fear shone in her stare. It was something else.

Peace.

She came here to save the chemist, knowing that this was how it would go down. Knowing that she could die.

Chem’s words rattled in his mind. About how she was the victim, not the villain. The victim of an accident, doing her best. Lying there, she looked familiar to Ford.

“Do it,” Rizzo said. “That’s an order.”

“I thought you wanted her alive,” Ford said. “We need intel for the coming war.”

“Why don’t you let me do the thinking, Soldier. Pull that trigger, and the war is over.”

Ford hesitated. He couldn’t lose the feeling that he somehow knew Rita.

“Do it. I thought you wanted to keep your friend Bobby safe.”

The double in meaning in Rizzo’s words was unmistakable. Kill The Creature, or Bobby dies. He knew that Rizzo would keep good on his word.

But at the sound of Bobby’s name, he couldn’t help but think of his friend. Everything he did since coming home was to keep him safe. Ford had to. He owed it to him. Ever since that day.

Guns fired in Ford’s mind.

The ambush. They were pinned down. Backup was miles away. But Ford saw an opening. He charged the enemy position, ignoring the bullets raining down around him. The enemy fell before his fury. But when he looked back, he realized he hadn’t gone alone. Bobby had his back—and Bobby had taken some of the fire.

Ford had to make it up to him. Had to keep him safe.

But when he looked down at The Creature, he couldn’t help but see Bobby lying there, another victim of Ford’s crusade.

He could sense the tension in the men around him. Their guns

moved unsteadily, and they started to drift toward him. There was nothing else for Ford to do. For the first time since Bobby fell, the sounds of war fell quiet in Tim's mind.

He focused on The Creature and pulled the trigger.

CHAPTER SIXTY-FOUR



As Rita lay on the grass, her animal instinct for survival battled with her human despair. She was dead, she knew it. But still, her body kept itself ready for any scrap of fight the universe would give her.

That chance came when the gun fired.

Instead of feeling hot lead pierce her body, she suddenly felt the tension gone from the cord pulling on her arms and legs. In microseconds, her mind flitted between possibilities.

I'm not dead. He missed. He didn't miss. I'm free. He freed me. And Rizzo is right there...

Her body was already moving by the time her mind caught up with her. Her claws ripped through his flesh like butter.

"Kill it, kill it, kill it!" Rizzo's screams echoed around the stadium, but his men stood in a stupor. They couldn't shoot her without shooting Rizzo. She used their confusion to her advantage. She tossed Rizzo into two of his men, then leapt to disarm the others. Ford was already working as well, and she heard the historian's roar and the poet's words.

She turned to look for the real reason she was here: Chem.

To his credit, the chemist was fighting one of Rizzo's thugs. He was just doing it *really* badly. The cheap suit bore down on him, hitting him again and again.

The ox wound up to deal Chem a powerful haymaker, but Rita caught his fist in her clawed hand.

He turned and nearly screamed when he saw her. She had fought this one before.

"You thought I was scary in the dark," she shouted, her mouth full of blood, "I'm a terror in the light."

The man's screams gurgled into silence as her claws went to work on his throat.

"Thanks," Chem said, his eyes fixated on the gore on front of him.

"I didn't come here to save you," she said. "I came to warn you. Something's wrong at the lab."

"What do you mean?"

But before she could reply. Rizzo answered for her.

"You fools!" He had limped over toward the stands, and was

shouting down to them. None of his fighting men were left.

“Hey asshole,” Ford shouted. “I quit.”

“Thanks for the two weeks. Enjoy your last minutes alive as a coward.”

“It’s over,” Willa shouted. “You’re finished. Your men weren’t enough. Your guns weren’t enough.”

“You’re as dumb as the rest,” he said. “You thought I’d bring guns to a fight against power like this?”

As he spoke, a boom echoed over the field. Then another. Rita’s skin crawled as she turned to look at the figures emerging onto the field. They were large, covered in ice, and very much alive.

“I’ve got freaks of my own,” Rizzo said, a wild glee in his smile. “And they’re much bigger than you.”

“Holy shit,” Chem said. “Our test subjects.”

CHAPTER SIXTY-FIVE



Elijah stared dumbfounded by the monsters lurching toward him. They looked like Brooke Alarawn when she became Cold Steel if she was drawn by a four-year-old. Hulking, half-melted masses of ice and flesh. Their faces were devoid of thought, but he could sense their emotion.

They were angry, and they were coming for them.

“What do you mean, ‘test subjects?’” Willa shouted at Chem.

“I swear it was for a good cause,” he answered meekly.

“Son of a bitch,” Elijah said.

“Well it looks like your test subjects are back for the makeup exam,” Ford said. He raised his gun and fired. A chip of ice broke off of the largest creature’s chest, but it didn’t slow. Ford fired again, six rounds in quick succession. They all hit the same point, but still the ice wouldn’t crack. The soldier looked at the gun in disgust and threw it to the grass. Then he turned to Elijah.

“Looks like it’s up to the freaks now.”

Elijah nodded, then charged.

Once the initial shock wore off, Elijah could see that these ice creatures were inferior to Cold Steel. They were slow, lumbering things, that lacked any sort of elegance. But that didn’t make them any less dangerous. And there were three of them.

If Elijah was in full control of his powers, if he could go Full Foundry, he imagined that he could wipe the field with them. But as it stood, with his powers at half mast, he’d have quite the fight set out for him.

Trusting that the others could at least run interference for him, Elijah focused in on the largest creature in the middle of the pack. It smiled at his approach, then raised a giant, ice covered arm.

Elijah dodged under it to the right, pleased to find he was fighting something slower than himself for a change. He slammed his fist into the thing’s frozen side—like Ford had done repeatedly to him. The creature shuttered at the impact, and Elijah took the opportunity to ring it’s head like a bell. The creature stepped back.

A small crack began to form—and then immediately healed.

“Dammit, Chem,” Elijah yelled, then he charged, metal arms

flailing with intent.

CHAPTER SIXTY-SIX



Elijah took the creature in the middle. Rita and Ford were running circles around the one on the right. That left the last one for Willa.

“Will,” Chem shouted. “These things were scum before I...fixed them.”

“So,” she said, circling the thing.

“So, I see no ethical reason why you should take it easy on them.”

Willa smiled.

“*And in her raiment’s hem was traced in flame* WISDOM, a name to shake

All evil dreams of power—a sacred name.”

As she spoke, light flowed down Willa’s arms. Strength coursed through her, and she decided not to waste it.

She charged the thing, shouting louder with each kick she landed. The thing seemed dazed at first, rather than hurt by her attack. But its confusion kept it from hurting her, so she kept it up.

“*Her words did gather thunder as they ran, And as the lightning to the thunder Which follows it, driving the spirit of man, Making earth wonder,*

It felt good to release energy—and to put her strength into punching something that deserved it rather than her bag at home. Soon, she grew tired of toying with the thing and decided to really drive the offensive.

“*So was their meaning to her words.*

No sword

Of wrath her right arm whirl’d, But on poor poet’s scroll, and with ‘his’ word She shook the world.”

The ice giant reeled from the force of her words but kept its feet. This was going to be harder than she thought.

CHAPTER SIXTY-SEVEN



Every successful punch shattered the creature's icy armor, and yet the thing kept fighting. Elijah watched in horror as the ice reformed again and again.

He lost his focus, and it cost him.

The icy fist slammed his skull like a wrecking ball. He hit the floor, unable to move. The cadaver raised its leg, and Elijah wondered if this would feel like being crushed by an avalanche. But the avalanche never came.

A flying tackle by Ford knocked the thing off balance. The man wrestled on top of it, but the thing grabbed him and threw him hard into the turf.

Elijah ran to his side. "You okay?"

Ford spat blood. "Never better."

Elijah looked back at the creature. It had left Ford to chase after Rita alongside another human icicle. Willa seemed to have hers under control, for now. But he wondered how long they could last.

"What do we do?" Elijah asked. "I can't seem to hurt this thing."

Ford rose to his feet.

"You can have all the strength in the world, but you'll never win a fight if you can't play defense. Keep your damn hands up, otherwise whatever flesh and blood's between your ears will end up on the pavement. Your feet are also vulnerable, so keep em moving. Defense wins championships."

"All right, coach," Elijah said. "Maybe skip the sports references."

Ford laughed. "You're a historian, right? The Russians beat the Germans by wearing them down, by keeping their guard up, by never letting those bastards land a definitive blow."

"The Nazis all froze to death," Elijah shouted, looking at the icy giants.

"All right, maybe that was a bad analogy, but the principle stands."

Elijah thought for a second. "Keep my fists up?"

Ford nodded. "Play defense and wait for an opening. And when you see that opening, you better take your fucking shot."

Then Tim Ford ran into the scrum and started shouting at one of the ice creatures. It seemed to have wearied from chasing Rita and

turned for Ford. But he wasn't angling to fight it. Instead he led it straight back to Elijah.

"Your turn big boy," Ford laughed. "Be the hero."

"Son of a bitch," Elijah muttered.

CHAPTER SIXTY-EIGHT



Chem watched helplessly as his friends, and until recently, enemies, waged battle against the icy cadavers. Once again, he had contributed to a mess that he was unable to clean up.

“Chem!” Rita hissed as she spun. She looked like a mouse running circles around an enraged frozen cat. “Your bag. I stole it.”

He stared at the lizardess. “Now’s not really a great time for confession.”

The creature’s right arm was elongated, like a twisted stalactite. She leapt just as the thing was set to impale her.

“Asshole,” she shouted back. “I brought it here.”

Chem perked up at the sound and turned to look where she was pointing. There, sitting under the away team bench was a small leather bag.

“I could kiss you,” he shouted as he ran for it.

His bag was a jumbled mess of pills, powders, and plastic vials. Chem cursed Rita for her carelessness. But she brought what he needed.

The sedative.

Chem used this powerful formula to help subdue Brooke Alarawn. And he thought it killed his test subjects when they went wild. No reason why it wouldn’t work again, except...

“Shit,” he said.

He couldn’t even begin to guess at the physiology animating these things, but he had checked their pulses before, and to call them thin would be an understatement. There was no telling how long it would take their hearts to spread his knockout juice through their cold-ass systems. Could take seconds, could take hours. And with the healing properties they seemed to possess, it might not work at all.

There was one way to make sure it hit them quickly. But they all needed to work together.

Looking up at the sideline, Chem spotted Ford’s bag, right where he had left it. He dumped it out and started rooting through all kinds of devices of destruction, hoping that he’d find what he needed. It didn’t take long. He grabbed two of Ford’s smoke grenades and a roll of duct tape.

Then he got to work.

CHAPTER SIXTY-NINE



Ford swung the giant wrench like his life depended on a home run, but still the frost fiend wouldn't crack. Between his attacks and the Rita's wild movements, they succeeded in doing little more than pissing it off.

"We can't keep this up," he shouted.

"Speak for yourself," Rita replied as she squeezed her way out of the thing's grip.

"OK, I can't keep this up," he shouted back. And it was true. Years of honing his body for fighting couldn't compare with whatever magic or scientific meddling messed with these things. Despite his experience, he was outmatched, and due to his experience, he was willing to admit it.

But still, what else could he do? It was his fault they were here to begin with.

He grit his teeth and swung again.

"Hey, yinzer!"

Ford turned to look at Chem. The madman was running toward them with what looked suspiciously like...

"A bomb?" Ford yelled back.

"Kind of," Chem said. "We've only got one chance to use it. I need all three of these assholes puckered up together. How's your lassoing skills, Cowboy?" As he spoke he handed Ford another weighted rope like the one he'd used against Rita. It was a good thing he'd brought a backup.

Ford shook his head as he grabbed it from the chemist. "Even if we could get them together, these things will snap my rope like licorice, and they'll do it without using their shoelaces."

Chem thought for a second. "Go tell the poet. She'll fix your problem. I'll get Rita and Elijah to play sheepdog."

Ford could see the wild look in the chemist's eyes. He grabbed the red bandana and pulled it up around his face. "Yippee Ki Yay, boss."

Then he ran to find Willa and prayed to whatever god of Heinz Field that this might just work.

CHAPTER SEVENTY



Rita didn't understand Chem's plan, but she didn't need to. All she needed to do was herd this frozen block of destruction toward the center of the field.

That, she could do.

What the ice creature had in strength, it lost in mobility. The thick formation around its neck made it hard for it to turn. Iced-over eyes made it hard for it to see. And while she couldn't hurt it, she could confuse the thing.

Left. Right. Left. Right.

Rita used every ounce of speed and stealth at her disposal to stay out of the thing's line of sight, emerging only to pound its face before slipping away. It couldn't keep her straight, and each attack forced it back a step. And another. And another. But it required her to move in close to the thing's grasp, closer than she wanted. One mistake, and she'd be toast.

Left. Right. Left.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-ONE



Elijah couldn't stand football, but he'd watched enough games socially to get the jist of it. Each team tried to move the line downfield. It was like colonial era warfare, a principle he could get behind—but one he wasn't currently succeeding at.

Standing fist-to-fist with the largest of the ice giants, they pushed against each other. Elijah had the greater arm strength, but since his power ended there, he was weaker than the full-bodied effort the creature used. He lost yardage with every step.

The thing was dumb as a block of ice, but it seemed to be enjoying this game—and Elijah hated to think what it had in mind for an end zone dance. But from the corner of his eye, he could see that Rita and Willa were both winning their fight, and he was determined to do his part.

So he decided to follow the soldier's advice and make his move count.

He stepped back from the creature and crouched low. Sensing weakness, the thing raised both fists high for a finishing blow.

Which is when Elijah sprung.

He wrapped his arms around the creature and heaved. It was like deadlifting a car, but he managed to pull it off.

Once it's legs were off the ground, the creature lost all leverage. It flailed its arms, trying to hit Elijah anywhere it could, but its lack of mobility made it impossible. Elijah couldn't keep this up for long, but he only needed to make it a few more steps.

He screamed over the cacophony of warfare and kept his legs driving toward the goal.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-TWO



One slip up would cost Rita everything, and it happened right as she moved her creature to its mark. The thing reached out blindly, and by sheer dumb luck managed to wrap its arm around Rita. It squeezed, and Rita felt the life being squashed out of her.

She kicked off of its legs and body, trying to squeeze free of its grip, but she had nothing firm to hold onto.

“Rita!”

She looked as Ford threw the line in her direction. She grabbed it out of the air as he pulled it taught.

It wasn’t much, but it was enough.

With one last kick, Rita shot out of the creature’s grip. But she didn’t run. She got to work.

All three of the ice giants stood back to back in a circle. Elijah held his in place, like a game of reverse tug of war. Willa’s seemed dazed. And in seconds, Rita’s was completely tangled in black cord.

She wove in between its legs and around it’s body. Then she jumped off of one creature to the next. The three became entangled by the cord, each flailing movement pulling them closer and closer together.

Elijah had rolled away, and he and Ford were holding the line tight. Rita wrapped it around one of the giant’s necks then tied it down before joining them.

Willa stood in a trance, maintaining whatever spell kept the cord from snapping. But even with Rita joining in, the three of them weren’t strong enough to hold the creatures forever.

“Now what,” she hissed.

“Now we see what Chem’s got cooking,” Elijah shouted.

“All set,” he shouted. He ran up to them with a pistol and handed it to Ford.

“What do I do with this?” the soldier shouted back.

Chem raised high a duct taped ball of metal and plastic. “Shoot the target,” he said. Then he turned and threw his device toward the creatures.

Ford took aim. Rita didn’t see him pull the trigger, but an explosion rocked the field. And a thick gray cloud of gas enveloped

the ice fiends.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-THREE



Willa watched the action taking place, fear growing in her heart. And with that fear, words came to mind. Words that she had vowed never to use again. She knew then and there that if she used Sean's poem, she could defeat the giants. But doing so would betray her grandfather's memory.

She had to trust that Chem knew what he was doing, and that the others could pull off his plan.

Rita leapt away from the mess right as the bomb exploded, and on cue, Willa switched spells. The cord snapped the moment she stopped talking, but her words now worked to keep the gas in place rather than dissipating through the air.

*"From cape to cape, with a bridge-like shape, Over a torrent sea,
Sunbeam-proof, I hang like a roof, The mountains its columns be."*

She watched the three icebergs choke and stumble. She understood how they felt.

Seconds passed, and when she couldn't hold it any longer, Willa released her spell. As the cloud dissipated, it revealed three half-melted corpses lying on the field.

"Holy shit," Elijah said.

"You're damn right," Ford cheered.

"Where's Rizzo?" was Willa's only response. She scanned the bleachers but the aging gangster was gone.

"I'm guessing wherever he is, it won't keep him safe from *her*."

Willa looked around and saw what Ford saw. Rita was no longer with them. A siren began to wail in the distance.

"We should probably get out of here," she said.

Elijah nodded, then Ford said, "You guys need a lift?"

CHAPTER SEVENTY-FOUR



The sun had set, leaving Rita just the way she had always preferred to be—veiled in silent darkness. But tonight, that didn't matter. Discretion be damned. She was on the hunt, and her prey was on the move. Seen or unseen by the citizens of Pittsburgh, she'd find her target. The animal instinct had taken over, and any drop of fear, any iota of hesitation was left behind.

Running, she leapt at the chain-link fence that was meant to keep drunken fans at bay. Its links could do nothing to stop the creature on the move. Hitting the ground on the other side, she rolled to her feet and paused.

He was gone. Rizzo was nowhere in sight. Only the sound of the city filled her senses.

Then the wind shifted, and she caught the scent. A filthy mixture of pungent body odor, over-priced cologne, and the fear of death.

Rizzo, she hissed, thankful for a moment for the grotesque transformation and what it allowed her.

She bolted in his direction with adrenaline pumping through her veins and her pulse pounding like a madman's drum in her head. Rationality gave way to instinct. Her legs drove her, webbed feet slapping the ground as she gained on him. The scent grew stronger, a strength only matched by the level of rage against this man.

Now within view, the sight of Rizzo sprinting across the empty parking lot toward the North Side's venues of restaurants and plazas only pushed her on with more urgency. He thought that he could find refuge within the watchful eyes of the city. But he wouldn't. Nothing would protect him from the claws of justice.

Reason edged in. She needed him here. Now. No need for the authorities or an angry mob of dutiful citizens stepping in to defend Rizzo from The Creature. Another three yards, and she jumped onto the hood of the only car in the closed-down lot. As quickly as her feet hit the steel, she was off again, sprung like a jack out of the box.

Rizzo screamed as she descended upon him from above. Her powerful legs pinned him to the ground. One clawed hand gripped his throat tightly, while the other hung in the air, poised to tear the old man to shreds.

His face twisted in fear, but Rizzo didn't look at her. Instead he looked at his son who was currently fleeing for the crowds—leaving his father to die by her hands.

“Shame,” Rita growled. “It looks like cowardice doesn't fall far from the tree.”

“Damn... freaks,” he managed to squeeze out.

Rita smiled. “Damn right.”

If Rizzo felt any pain, the world never heard it. And they found no evidence of his body either. Just a trail of blood leading down toward the river.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-FIVE



The heels of Elijah's best dress shoes went clickety-clack down the polished hall of Allegheny General Hospital. They were worn, scuffed, and second hand—just like his suit. He didn't know exactly why he was told to come, but his Sunday best only seemed appropriate for a place like this. A bundle of flowers hung in his right hand. Posies, just like he had been instructed. He had spent enough time doubting Chem's words, he decided he would trust his friend this time without question. Chem had earned at least that much. And then, they would have a very long, thorough conversation.

Elijah couldn't be sure what it was, but a chill ran through his spine. Hospitals always gave him the creeps. But this was something more.

As if Willa could feel his discomfort, or maybe because of her own, she rubbed his back, like a mother with a sick child.

"What the hell are we doing here?" he finally asked.

"You got me, Professor."

They approached a partition, and a set of eyes met them. "Name?" the monotone asked.

"Don't worry, Sherry. They're with me."

The attendant looked up with a grin. "Like that's supposed to offer me any solace, Hank?"

Chem smiled at her and then at his friends. "Henry. These two always call me by my proper name. Now, if you don't mind..."

Chem turned and walked down the hall and the nurse motioned Elijah and Willa to follow. Catching her eye, Willa gave the only answer she could, "Still, you got me, Professor."

Elijah's face broke with a smile. "If he brought us here to help him boost some drugs, I'm officially done."

Quickening his pace, Elijah caught Chem at the door to one of the rooms. He tried to glance through the sliver of a window in the thick oak, but Chem stepped in his way.

His face was solemn. A look that was foreign to Elijah. "Willa. Elijah. Thanks for coming. Really. It means a hell of a lot to me."

"No problem, Hank," Willa replied with a thin grin.

Chem couldn't help but return it, if only for a moment. "I need to

introduce you to someone. Someone very important to me.”

“Chem, what the—” Elijah began, before he was cut off by his friend.

“You’ll have a lot of questions, I’m sure. There will be time for that. But first, just come with me. It’s time I told you the truth.” He turned the handle and pushed open the door.

Elijah’s stomach churned. He was never one much for surprises, especially ones delivered on the floor of a hospital ward. But he followed his friend, still trusting. Turning the institutional white-walled corner, he laid his eyes on a woman. At first glance, she took his breath away. Her small, round face was nearly angelic—the only thing disrupting her heavenly stature were the series of tubes and wires connect to her body.

Chem turned to face him. “May I?” He held his hand out, as if asking Elijah to dance.

“Sure thing.” Handing over the posies, Elijah held his breath and tried to still the beating of his own heart so as not to disrupt the ceremony at play before him. Chem, as if he had done it a million times, walked to the bed, paused over the woman, and proceeded to remove a small bouquet of wilting flowers from a vase. After depositing them in the trash, he changed the water, and dropped the new ones in their place.

Over the past six months, Elijah had observed his friend in many situations, but he’d never seen him like this. His every motion, his very stature, was graceful. Leaning down, Chem swiped a strand of hair out of the woman’s face and rubbed the back of his knuckles on her cheek.

“I want you to meet my friends,” Elijah could barely hear Chem whisper. Willa took the cue first, and Elijah followed her over to the bedside. “Guys, this is Vida.”

Elijah and Willa listened closely as Chem told his story, about the woman and her disease, about his misguided attempts to save her, and how she ended up here—and about the many lies Chem had told to protect her.

“You could have told us,” Elijah said. “About her, about everything.”

“I know that now,” Chem said. “But when you’ve been living with a secret for as long as I have, it gets hard to share it with anyone. And after what happened with Brooke, I couldn’t risk losing you.”

Willa elbowed Elijah in the side, then stepped forward and pulled Chem into a hug. “What Elijah is trying to say is, thanks for sharing this with us.”

“Yeah, uh, what she said,” Elijah forced out. “I shouldn’t have doubted you.”

Chem laughed. “Doubting me was the smartest thing you’ve done all week. Way smarter than rushing into battle to save me. Not that I’m complaining.”

Elijah smiled. “But you see now what we’re trying to do? That our powers can serve a purpose?”

“Jury’s still out on that one,” he said. “Until you eventually get arrested. Then the jury will find you guilty in record time.”

“That’s exactly why we need you,” Elijah said. “Who knows better how to avoid the cops than you?”

Chem thought for a second. “You make a strong argument.”

“And if there’s anything we can do to help,” Willa said, nodding toward Vida.

Running a hand across the top of his head, Chem looked down at the floor. “Well, now that you mentioned it, there is something.”

“Anything,” she said.

“Well, it seems my Vida Serum isn’t as close as I hoped it was to being finished—a football field full of demon snowmen kind of proves that. Honestly, I’m at the end of my rope. I’ve tried every bit of sanctioned and unsanctioned science I can think of, and nothing.”

Willa smiled. “Are trying to say you need the help of a more *useful* discipline? Like poetry?”

Chem cocked his head to the side. “Nothing like interdisciplinary studies to change the world. Too bad a historian still isn’t worth shit.”

“Hey,” Elijah laughed. “Who the hell got the information on Ford?”

Chem patted Elijah on the shoulder. “Always the fragile academic ego.” He then glanced down at his watch. “Listen, thanks for coming, guys. We’ve got more to discuss, but I’ve got a date I can’t miss.”

Elijah glanced at Willa, who replied with a shrug. He decided to let him have just a bit more mystery between them.

“Mind giving me time to say goodbye?” He motioned to Vida.

“Of course,” Willa said, as she pulled Elijah out of the room by the sleeve of his coat.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-SIX



Voodoo was relatively empty for a Thursday evening. Although Tim Ford still preferred the dirty, smoky, dive bars of the city's darker streets, the place was starting to grow on him. He couldn't be sure if it was the friendly vibe, or maybe the fact that people preferred talking and laughing over sitting in their solitary spots, crying into their beers. But there was something nice about the joint, even if he had to pay over five bucks for beer, which generally he had a rule against.

More than that, Voodoo had become Bobby's place. And right now, anywhere with Bobby felt like home.

Flexing his shoulders, Tim felt his muscles strain. Still in decent shape, he nevertheless had taken a pounding on Heinz Field. Sure, it wasn't anything like the damage he dealt, but Rizzo and his goons left their mark. He had a feeling that he'd have to get back into top form, and soon.

"How's the job hunt going?" Bobby finally asked him, drawing Ford out of his own head.

Ford grinned. "I think I finally got one. Or, at least a line on one. That feels damn good."

"I bet. What is it?"

He paused, trying to pull an honest enough answer out of his ass. "Eh. Just some place that could use a guy like me."

Bobby nodded. "Good, man. I knew there was good work out there for you, something that would fit. I mean, everybody is talking about how the city is blowing up. Figured that could bring some jobs. Good to hear you're getting a little piece of the action."

Ford took a sip of his beer and glanced across the room. A couple of patrons, late twenties, early thirties, sat sipping their drinks and laughing. He turned back to Bobby. "Yeah. I'd say it's blowing up. Maybe more than we know. And when things blow up, I generally find something to do. It will keep me pretty busy though. Think you can handle me not being around to help out."

Bobby laughed his familiar laugh. "Are you shitting me? I'm getting sick of taking care of you. Frankly, it was getting pathetic. Speaking of which, how's this new job pay?"

"Ah. About that. The pay's shit. Nearly non-existent. But the work

is good, and I think I'm gonna like my coworkers."

Bobby reached out and patted him on the shoulder. But Ford's eyes were locked across the room on the couple sitting at the two-top enjoying themselves. The man with the scraggly dark hair and beard to match looked up at the same time as the woman. Tim raised his glass to them, and Willa and Elijah raised theirs right back.

"Yeah. I think I'm gonna like my coworkers a lot," Ford said.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-SEVEN



The river flowed by as it had for millennia, paying no attention to the man sitting on its shores. Chem watched it pass down toward the Ohio which would eventually dump into the Mississippi. He felt light, lighter than he had for a long time. It felt good to come clean with Willa and Elijah about Vida and the actual work of his hands. The future was still unknown and unknowable. But, for the first time in a long time, he felt a sense of hope. All was not lost. And now, knowing that the magician was on board, he realized that he might just have exactly what it took to fix her. To fix Vida.

"This seat taken?" The now familiar hiss resounded in his ear.

Chem jumped with a start. He had no idea how many times it would take to see her mutated face for him to get used to it, but this time, he was glad to see her. "I'm saving it for you, Leviathan."

Her thin mouth turned up at the edges, helping Chem to realize that she knew him well enough to understand that his jokes with her were a sign of friendship. Maybe even flattery. She stepped around the bench and lowered herself onto its edge, pulling her feet up under her haunches. Staring down river where the sun was starting to set behind the Pittsburgh hillsides. "It's almost beautiful. I haven't noticed that for long time. For years."

"Yeah," Chem said. "Let's do this more often. Maybe start a book club." He paused and looked up at her. "Listen, I've got something I need to tell you."

"I know." Rita was quiet for beat and then said, "You got the dirt back. You don't need me anymore."

Chem smiled. "There's always more where that came from. I'm sure you could find it. God knows I haven't been at saint."

"Long way from a sinner, too," she said with a gurgle in the back of her throat.

Chem shrugged. He didn't think she was right, but he was open to the possibility. "It's not that. I asked you to come here so I could thank you. I didn't expect you to show up to save my sorry ass."

"I know. I almost didn't. But you've done a lot for me and... And I'm grateful. Couldn't have you dying in my place."

Chem nodded again and silence grew between them. "What are

you going to do now that human trials are officially on hold."

Her eyes cast out along the water's rocky edge. "I don't know. Thought about moving out to Los Angeles, take a shot at the movies."

Chem laughed. He never heard her make a joke before. It felt out of place, but almost right. "Nah. You'd get type casted way too easily out there."

"Leading lady. Rom coms. You're right. That stuff's bullshit anyway," she said. "I figure I'll just keep doing what I'm doing. Find my way."

"I expect you will. Listen, stay in touch. You know I'll keep working on the serum, and, if it's successful..."

"That's a big if, Doctor," she hissed, the darkness returning to her tone.

"Knock that shit off, will ya? You know I never actually graduated."

"And yet your oath still stands."

She stood, pivoting to face him. Her dark beady eyes pierced him, and for the first time, she looked truly human. Extending a clawed hand out to him she waited.

Chem stood and took her hand in his big meaty palm and gently squeezed. He pulled, drawing her in close, he wrapped his other arm around her in an awkward embrace. Her body stiffened for second and then relaxed. Chem knew it was the first truly authentic human touch she had had for long, long time. She pushed him away, gave him a nod, and with three short strides she dove into the dark waters of the Monongahela.

EPILOGUE



Anthony Rizzo, Jr. climbed the ancient stairs in his family's mansion, dripping water and mud as he went. He didn't care about the mess. One of the maids would clean it up. One of *his* maids he reminded himself.

His father's funeral didn't last long. There was nobody to view, and few kind words to share about the old man. But everyone wanted to take a minute to shake Junior's hand as the rain poured down. The message was clear.

He was in charge now.

With his father gone, the family business fell to him. Finally, after a lifetime of living in the old man's shadow, the crown was now his. And he would do this thing right, run this city with the firm hand it needed.

He opened the door to his father's office, but it wasn't empty.

There, sitting in his father's chair, in *his* chair, was a giant of a man wearing an impeccably tailored suit. The grin on his face held no warmth, a fact accentuated by the perfect smoothness of his bald head.

"My apologies for missing the funeral," the man said. "I've been trying to keep a low profile these days. You know who I am, of course?"

Tony nodded, trying to maintain a semblance of cool. "Only by reputation. My father used to talk about you, about the things you did in the old days. Back when Alarawn Steel..." He left the sentence hanging there, unsure of what to say.

"Yes, well, it's best to leave the past in the past. I'm more interested in the future. In *your* future. The freaks that murdered your father are still out there. I'm curious to know what you plan to do about it. And with the business."

Tony managed to keep his jaw from dropping, a feat he was quite proud of. No one else new about his father's debacle at Heinz Field except for a few of the men who survived it. And they were as loyal as they came, with strict orders to keep quiet about what went down that night. How did this washed up foot soldier know about it? And what was he implying?

As Tony pondered those questions, he thought back to the reports about what really happened to Alarawn Industries the night that Brooke Alarawn died.

Maybe he has a bone to pick with the freaks, too. Maybe I've found a new ally.

Tony stood a little taller and decided to play his new card with confidence.

"I'm going to find them all, and I'm going to kill them. Then once those debts are settled, I'm going to take this family into the future. We're going to run Pittsburgh, like the old days, and I'll be the one steering the ship."

The large man rose to his feet. He crossed the room with long, purposeful strides and put his hand on Tony's shoulder.

"I had a feeling you'd say that. Unfortunately, I still have need of those, 'freaks.'"

Tony gasped as pain shot down his arm. The large man smiled wider as he squeezed, crushing his shoulder like it was made of tin.

"What... why would—" But Tony never got his question out. The large man's hands surrounded Tony's throat.

"What was it that your father used to say? 'Without the Rizzos, this city would crumble?' That, my boy, is why. I'm gonna churn this city into slag. And I'll need the heroes to make it happen."



Dear Readers,

It's always an honor writing notes to the folks who get to the end of one of our books. We've got a bunch of them under the belt, and it never ceases to amaze me that we get the chance to do this kind of work and write stories that have the possibility of entertaining and maybe, just maybe, providing a little inspiration.

So, thank you for being a part of the journey!

Speaking of the journey, Lee already gave the overview of how in the world the Steel City Heroes were reborn in his notes in *Catalyst*. I read them again just now, and it made me grin like a fool while sitting here at my Average Joe job at the end of the day. We've been working together for over three years now, and I think we're coming back to the series at just the right time. Our tools are sharper, and our calluses are thickened. We've been studying story arc and craft like madmen, while also trying to dial in our prose. And I think we're able to give Willa, Chem, Elijah, and their new associates their due.

I hope you agree!

If you're an old SCH fan, you know that *Corrosion* was COMPLETELY new.

This was a ridiculous task! Stuffing a book two that had never been written between two preexisting books was a ludicrous task. It took us longer than most books we've written because there were a lot of needles that needed threading. I was skeptical at first, but once the ball got rolling, once we reimagined Rita and Tim Ford, and once the narrative started to come together I knew we were on to something.

Naturally, once *Corrosion* was created, it changed EVERYTHING for *Crucible*, the next book in the saga. We've already ripped it to shreds and searched its remains for the best bits and rebuilt the story around those gems. As of writing these notes (4/24/2019) it is ALMOST done and will be published soon for your reading pleasure.

Thanks again for giving your time to our heroes in Pittsburgh. A great city with an amazing past and an even better future!

If you want to give back just a little, take a second to leave a review. Better yet, share the book with a friend (especially if they love Pittsburgh)!

Cheers,
Chris



[Sign up](https://www.subscribe.com/chris_and_lee) for Chris and Lee's newsletter for updates, new releases, and promotions. When you join the community, you'll get a FREE copy of their fast, fun thriller, *The Devil's Due*: https://www.subscribe.com/chris_and_lee

If you liked *Catalyst*, keep reading. There's a lot more to come for Elijah, Willa, and Chem in *Corrosion*, book 2 of the Steel City Heroes saga!

You can also check out the other series by CM Raymond and LE Barbant.

The Rise of Magic is a future fantasy series that initiates an enormous and sprawling storyline that opens a world of forty books written by over ten authors. Set in The Kurtherian Gambit Universe, *The Rise of Magic* follows the origins of Hannah, a young woman from humble roots, who finds the magic inside of her might just be enough to fight an unjust regime that has taken over her city. If you're looking for a badass heroine with heart and snark, you'll love this series! But beware, take one step down *The Age of Magic* path, and you'll be

walking for a long, long time!

Want more snarky heroines? Well, Chris and Lee also have an urban fantasy series about the mythic gods return to earth in their series with ST Branton, *Forgotten Gods*. The tagline is: *The gods are real, and they're assholes*. And it couldn't be closer to the truth. This series is fun, fast, exciting, and a little irreverent.

Vampires, werewolves, and all manner of monstrous creatures serve the unknown powers of old, but the story centers on the humans who make the heroic choice to fight them. Join Vic and her crew as they attempt to save earth from the gods who want it back. You won't forget, *Forgotten Gods*.



Chris and Lee Online

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/smokeandsteel/>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/lebarbant>

https://twitter.com/_cmraymond_

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/l.e.barbant/>

<https://www.instagram.com/cm.raymond.writes/>